

EXPERT TIPS FOR TAKING YOUR BOOK INTO CLASSROOMS

THE WRITER[®]

THE
ANNUAL
CHILDREN'S
AND YA
ISSUE

IMAGINE
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PUBLISH

**A GOLDEN RULE
FOR EDITING**

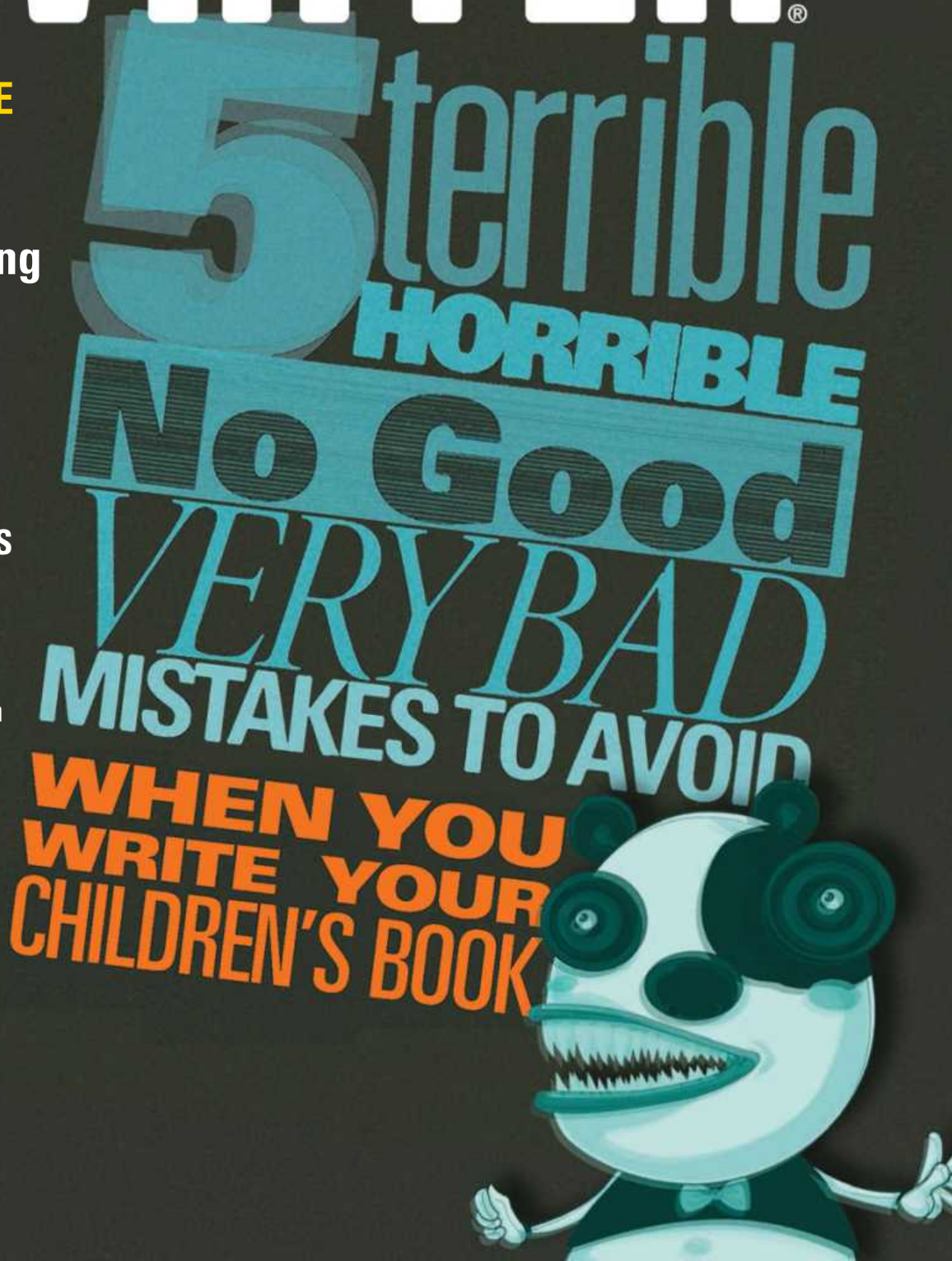
The insatiable
quest for setting

**PAY ATTENTION
TO SECONDARY
CHARACTERS!**

10 CONTESTS
FOR YOUNG WRITERS

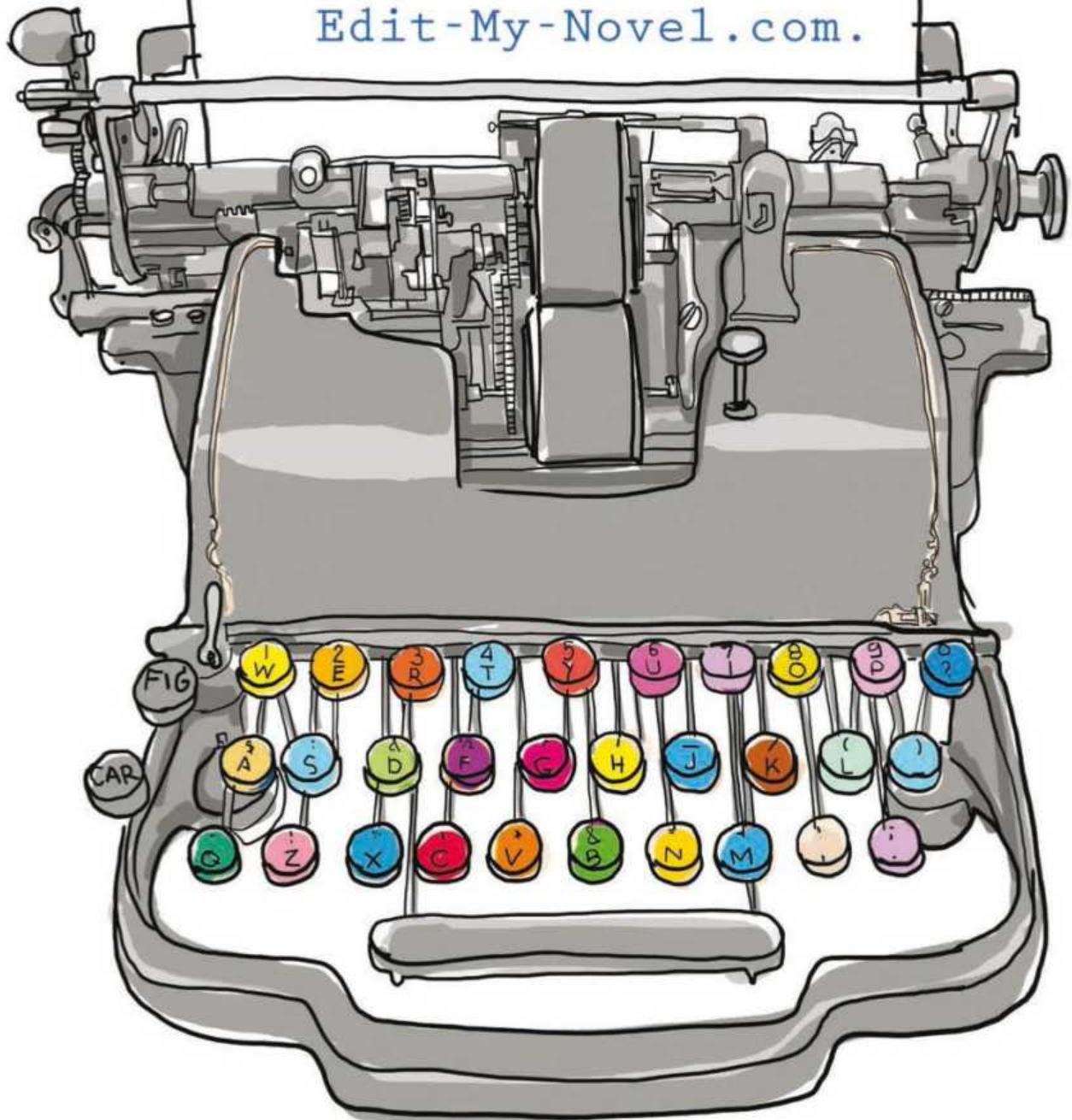


Sharon Dennis Wyeth
Kwame Alexander
Kelly Gardiner
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18

5 terrible, horrible [you know the rest] mistakes

Working on a book for young readers?
Take these tips on what not to do.

BY MARGARET MEACHAM

FEATURES

12

Pure writer

Julianna Baggott develops cross-genre stories of hope, faith and love.

BY ELFRIEDA ABBE

24

Dual power

Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely talk about co-writing for the community good.

BY MEGAN KAPLON

26

Venice reach

To deepen your sense of setting, explore it.

BY JACK SMITH

12



24

DEPARTMENTS

9 BREAKTHROUGH
One true rule
 Make sure your story will get two paws up.
 BY ANICA MROSE RISSI

10 WRITING ESSENTIALS
Walk-ons
 Create minor characters that pop off the page.
 BY MICHAEL KURLAND

34 FREELANCE SUCCESS
School supplies
 Connect to young readers with dynamic classroom visits.
 BY MELISSA HART

36 CLASS ACTION
A class of its own
 Think pursuing an MFA for your chapter book is overkill? Think again.
 BY MEREDITH QUINN

38 CONFERENCE INSIDER
Read, write, draw
 Children's book writers and illustrators take over Midtown.
 BY MEREDITH QUINN

40 LITERARY SPOTLIGHT
For girls, by girls
 Adults can publish too, but girls 8 and up get preference.
 BY MELISSA HART



5



10



40

IN EVERY ISSUE

4 From the Editor

5 Take Note
 Kelly Gardiner, Kwame Alexander, Sharon Dennis Wyeth and more.

42 Markets

47 Classified advertising

48 How I Write
 Julie Murphy: "The key to nailing the YA voice is remembering that teens aren't the aliens we so often make them out to be."



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“Once upon a time” is one of the most iconic phrases in storytelling history.

It precedes “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” and “I am an invisible man” and “Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stair-head” and “The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o’clock” – to cite some of my favorite first lines.

Essentially, however, “once upon a time” is embedded in each of those delicious first lines. Each one asks us to enter a universe, to keep reading, to ask the question: Then what happened? A first line often contains the universe of the story within a short scope, and no one can dispute the importance of getting it right.

That may be even more true for children’s and YA writing – the focus of this month’s issue. We like to start the year providing you with interviews from those who are practitioners, editors, educators and publishers in the field of this very important, formative genre of writing. We all start as children when it comes to stories, and most readers (and likely most writers) find their love of words early in life. We believe the industry of children’s and YA writing sets the foundation for a lifetime.

We hope you enjoy the interviews, how-tos and tools other authors share in their stories. My experience is that people who write for young readers are ambitious: They want to change the world by giving voice to the concerns, joys, difficulties and adventures young people face, dream about and represent. This issue is our way of supporting those goals.

Our overarching mission remains in place even in the stories – such as Jack Smith’s travel journal about setting – that don’t point to young readers. Setting, after all, crosses all genres.

We hope you enjoy this issue. But don’t let your imagination stop here. Join us online at writermag.com and in our digital edition for additional stories about the craft of writing and about making your “once upon a time” happen now.

Alicia Anstead

Alicia Anstead
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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Sound thoughts

Can you discover narrative through auditory practices?

By Sarah Tomp



One day, my teenage son said, “Your writing must be going well. I heard you chanting.” Reading my work out loud is a crucial part of my writing process, most particularly in the initial start of a story, and again, when I think it’s almost done. When I’m starting a new piece, it’s a way to hear the voice more fully. The sound of it becomes part of my thinking. Since I wrote *My Best Everything* from my home in California, reading aloud was a way to bring the setting of the Virginia mountains close. It helped me hear the sounds of that particular place. Even better, I started thinking in the language of my teenage years.

At the end of the process, it’s a way to slow down. It allows – or forces – me to focus on individual words. Grammar matters, and it is not so easily skimmed over. I hear how individual words fit together into sentences, paragraphs and scenes, and the resulting rhythm and flow of my prose. Dialogue has to prove itself as true while spoken. I get to hear the voices of my characters as they tease, discuss, argue and fall in love.

When I first started writing, I worked on picture books. I’d read thousands of them, first as a teacher, then as a mother. Besides the warm connections made in the process of lap reading, I loved the concise stories and the way an emotional punch could be conveyed in a few short lines. Also, I loved the *sound* of them. Picture books are meant to be an oral performance. They are an auditory experience as much as they are visual. So of course, part of my process was to read my stories aloud.

Now that I’m writing for young adults, I feel as though the auditory component is equally important. Most teens are passionately devoted to their music. They have their headphones on, music on. They are listening to rhythms and beats, paying

attention to lyrics with a white-hot intensity. And as they talk to each other, rehashing their days, recalling every detail, they are animated storytellers passing on their joys and grievances. Of course they deserve to have their literature be pleasing to the ear, even if it’s only read silently.

As a teacher, I know the power of a shared story. When teaching middle school, I started each class period with five to 10 minutes of oral reading time. These stories were not ones we were using in class. There were no quizzes or tests. It was simply a way to provide a transition from the rough hallways to the classroom. But it also built community within my classes, more than any other activity. There is a bonding that occurs when reading a story together.

When teaching creative writing, I use reading one’s work out loud as part of the instruction. Sometimes I’m the one to read. I’ve been accused of making everything sound better, but the fact is, there’s a power to having an immediate audience. There might not be a better feeling than having a room of listeners laugh at the right spot, or form a collective *ahhh*. Before we workshop a piece, I have the author read the opening paragraphs to the group. Besides serving as a distraction to a nervous participant, it allows us to hear his or her intent in a new manner. Even more important, it reminds us of the human heart and soul behind the words before we begin to dissect them.

That human heart is something we need to hear as we write alone at our desks. Even when it sounds like chanting.

Sarah Tomp has an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. *My Best Everything*, her novel for young adults, was published in 2015.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Sharon Dennis Wyeth

For more than a quarter century, award-winning author Sharon Dennis Wyeth has been writing and publishing children's and YA books. As part of her writing process, Wyeth draws on historical research as well as stories gathered from her family members and her own experiences growing up in a working-class African American community in Washington, D.C. Her books often feature African American children as protagonists and take place in a mixture of historical and contemporary settings. Her writing, while focusing usually on family relationships, doesn't shy away from difficult issues such as slavery, poverty and homelessness. Wyeth has won the Stephen Crane Award and has been shortlisted for a LAMBDA award. Her picture book *Something Beautiful* was named a Children's Book Council Notable Book and a Parents Magazine Best Book of the Year. Wyeth graduated from Harvard University and later worked as a family counselor in New York City, where she started a theater company and began writing romance novels before turning her focus to writing for young readers. Her most recent publication is *The Granddaughter Necklace*.

WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT WRITING?

I have learned that writing is a process, and that it takes longer than you think it's going to take. I'm a creative writer, so I have to make the whole thing up, though real life stories do work their way in beneath the surface. There are so many components that come into play, some that you can't predict before you begin the process. And there are different parts of myself that get into the mix – memory, imagination and then, too, my passion for social history. I also have audience to think about, and I do think about them a lot since they're children and young people. I feel I have to be careful in how I express certain things to them, complicated things sometimes that are hard for more mature people to understand. After writing the number of books I've written, across various genres and age groups, I would say that it's taught me to be patient, to work every day

that I can that's been scheduled and to wait for things to come together.

HOW HAS THIS HELPED YOU AS A WRITER?

I'm writing a historical fiction YA book right now. I've been working on it for two years. It's inspired by some of my family's stories, but it's heavily fictionalized. I've changed the structure several times, and I've also changed the perspective. One might think that after a year, I would have given up, but the story was so compelling to me that I continued to move forward. After I really found the structure and the perspective that was appropriate for the material, that gave me the latitude I needed as a writer to tell the story in the best way I knew how. Then the book began to write itself. It's still work, but it's not as arduous. So I think breaking the ground is a very important phase. It's a difficult phase, but once you take the time to do that, the book somehow propels you forward. You know, I'm going to be finishing that book soon. It would not have the depth and excitement for me, and hopefully for the reader, if I had not done that preliminary work and just taken the hard knocks in the preliminary phases.

—Gabriel Packard is the associate director of the creative writing MFA program at Hunter College in New York City.



ASK THE WRITER

When writing dialogue, do I always have to follow a question with the verb “asked,” or can I use “said,” too?

This is an issue of the dialogue tag: the language after a line of dialogue that indicates who did the speaking.

“Will the flight leave soon?” he asked.

Here, “he asked” is the tag.

While you can certainly use “asked” as the verb in a tag that follows a question, you don't have to. “Said” is a perfectly acceptable replacement. To say, after all, means to express oneself in words, and we do that when we ask questions.

Keep in mind that not all lines of dialogue need to be followed by tags. You might use action to identify the speaker and also reveal more about the circumstances or the character's emotions.

“Will the flight leave soon?” He gripped the handle of his suitcase and looked out at the empty tarmac.

That action reveals more anxiety than this one.

“Will the flight leave soon?” He slumped in the chair and yawned.

—Brandi Reissenweber teaches fiction writing and reading fiction at Gotham Writers Workshop.

★ “Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms.” —Alfred Hitchcock

Spotlight

Kwame Alexander and *The Crossover*

Acclaimed novelist and poet Kwame Alexander won the 2015 Newbery Medal for his book *The Crossover*. Written in the rhythms of a poetry jam — a rare technique for a novel — Alexander weaves a tale of basketball, family, friendship and puppy love. Alexander is also the founder of Book-in-a-Day, a student-run publishing program, and is a frequent guest in schools. He is author of more than 20 books, including the children’s book *Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band* and the YA novel *He Said, She Said*. In October, he was at the Southern Festival of Books in Nashville, where we caught up with him.

How did you develop the technique for *The Crossover*? *The Crossover* was my first attempt at writing a novel in verse. It took about five years to write it because I realized in the first few drafts that I was writing poems that were linked, but there wasn’t a story. There wasn’t a beginning, middle and end. Eventually, I realized I had to write a novel, and the poetry was incidental in the beginning. After I had the story down, I made the poems work on their own individually, in addition to [being] part of the whole.

How did this affect character development? Poetry is so precise. You have to say a whole lot in very few words. I knew I was going to sacrifice certain things. For instance, there is no particular setting.

No setting? I wanted kids around the country and even around the world to be able to identify and relate to these characters in a really profound way — so that a kid in Sioux City or a kid in Brooklyn or a kid in Austin or Nashville would be able to say: *Maybe this is me. This is my story.* —Bill Conger

Kelly Gardiner and *Goddess*

Kelly Gardiner is best known for her historical YA novels and other books for children. She crossed genres in 2015 with her first book for adults: *Goddess*, a historical novel about Julie d’Aubigny, 17th century swordfighter, opera singer, bisexual and cross-dresser. We asked her about the writing process.

Why an adult audience? Once I decided that it would be structured as a death-bed confession, with Julie looking back over her life, I knew it had to be written with an adult readership in mind, rather than for young adult readers. That was one of the earliest decisions I made. Current YA novels don’t tend to be narrated by older people or finish with the bleak and far-too-early death of the narrator (although there are notable exceptions). We tend to reach for hope in fiction for young people. But there was no other way for it to end, for me. That said, there’s no real reason why young adult readers can’t or won’t read it, and in fact some librarians have made the decision to shelve copies in both young adult and general fiction, which is fabulous.

What are the biggest challenges of switching genres? I write for a wide range of age groups, and it’s an intuitive process at the start — part of knowing I want to write the story is also being sure which age group is right for that story. Technical decisions about structure, syntax and vocabulary, and creative and ethical decisions about themes and approaches, flow from that point and continue throughout the writing process. *Goddess* is much more complex structurally than I would normally attempt in a kids’ or YA novel, for example. It’s constructed in five acts with a prologue, reflecting the operas in which La Maupin performed, and switches between first-person recitative and third-person crowd scenes. A hidden structure also reflects the Baroque opera tradition of building up to a climax at the end of the second act.

How’s that different for younger readers? You can switch between points of view and voices in books for readers down to middle years, but you’d approach it differently and build in more scaffolding so they know what’s going on. All my novels are carefully but (hopefully) invisibly structured: they just don’t usually have to operate like an opera, or map to a real person’s chronology. It was a complex beast to manage and I built the world’s biggest spreadsheet to help me.



Rebecca Michaels

Advice for others? I’d encourage anyone who wants to write for different age groups to do some reading about reader development, vocabulary, perspectives and approaches for each age group. That stuff is far from intuitive, but there is a lot of research around, especially in the education and literacy fields, and if we’re writing for kids or young people we really need to understand it — and then make it look easy.

How long did it take to find Julie’s voice? I heard that voice, crystal clear in my mind, even before I started writing. Weird. The first lines I ever wrote in the recitative, before I’d made any conscious decisions about the book, are still there. Amazingly they’re often the lines that people quote back to me.

What was your process? I don’t mean to say I just jotted down what some ethereal voice dictated. She is an unreliable narrator — at times selfish, oblivious, rude and boastful, and at other times vulnerable and frail — so that balance took some work. Years of it. In the endless redrafting and editing phases, I tried to be ruthless about paring it back, even though it was clamoring in my ears, especially in the later stages, when the character is feverish and weak and rambling a little. And that, my friends, is why we love our editors.

—Nicki Porter

Joanna Crowell



Notes from the blogosphere

NAME

Jessica Bernt

YEARS BLOGGING

3

AGE

15

WEBSITE

bookishserendipity.com

What is the most important lesson you have learned from blogging?

I have learned a lot about what makes a fantastic post – a solid introduction, establishing a goal, powerful photographs, a strong call to action – from these past few years, and I have been able to apply the knowledge to other parts of my life, like schoolwork.

How do you juggle schoolwork and blogging?

Since so much of my day is spent at school and working on homework at home, it can be difficult to find the time to blog, so I often work on the go. I can always draft blog posts on the bus or use my phone to

reply to emails. I also often use to-do lists to prioritize the most important tasks each week, and I try my best to stick to that plan.

What made you want to review books?

My first blog was targeted toward young writers because I was one of them. I loved writing stories, and that blog was full of all types of writing and book-related content. While I really enjoyed writing those posts, I found myself gradually shifting to include more book reviews and YA book industry news. I ended up completely rebranding that first blog into Bookish Serendipity in early 2014. That first blog allowed me to discover

more about myself and my style as a blogger.

How did you figure out the winning formula for content balance?

Trial and error played a huge role in the journey. I carefully watch the reactions of my readers to see which posts receive the most views, provoke the most discussion and are shared on social media the most. This allows me to gauge which post types I should write more of, and which post types I should write less of.

For example, I noticed that blogging tips and tutorial posts are always very popular, whereas the blog tour posts tend to receive fewer views and com-

ments. Because of this discovery, I scheduled several more posts with advice for bloggers, and accepted fewer blog tour invitations. The formula is truly a work in progress!



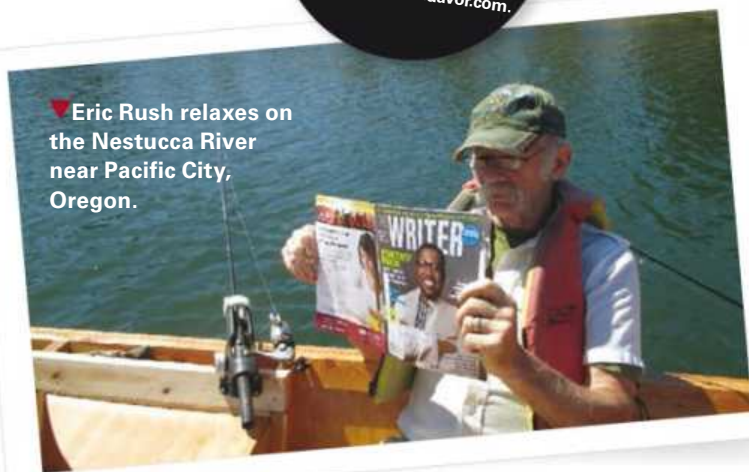
➔ Download the digital edition now to find out what 3 things Jessica thinks you can learn from a teen blogger.

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS THE WRITER?

WHERE DO YOU READ THE WRITER?

Send a photo of yourself and a short description of the location to tweditorial@madavor.com.

▼ Eric Rush relaxes on the Nestucca River near Pacific City, Oregon.



▲ While participating in an art fair in Traverse City, Michigan, children's book author Karen Bell-Brege caught up on some reading with an out-of-this-world friend.

One true rule

Make sure your story gets two paws up.

The third-most-important rule on my high school varsity soccer team (after Rule One: Don't be late and Rule Two: No Pepsi products – the coach was a retired Coca-Cola executive) was: When in doubt, kick it out. It's not a great rule for soccer (kicking the ball out of bounds gives the opposing team possession), but we weren't a great team. And even imperfect guidelines and boundaries give a beginner someplace to start.

As an executive editor in children's book publishing, I appropriated this rule when asked to speak at writers' conferences about the rules of writing and revision. "When in doubt, cut it out," I've told rooms full of aspiring authors. It's a better rule in revising than in soccer, because most writers (both first-timers and multi-published authors) tend to include too much in their early drafts – excess back story, description and other passages that they may need to have written, but that the reader does not need to read. If you think something can be cut, it probably should be.

There are exceptions to that rule, of course. The terrible and wonderful truth about writing is: There are no real rules. At least, that's what I'd always thought. But when I began my own first-draft journey and needed some parameters to help guide my way – to give this beginner a place to start – I discovered what I've come to see as the one true rule of writing: When in doubt, add a dog.

I stumbled onto this rule while brainstorming the plot for my debut novel. The idea for the book began with a title, *Anna Banana and the Friendship Split*. This was a useful starting point because

it told me several things about what the story would be. Before I'd written a word, I knew the book's target audience (that's a chapter-book title, so I'd be writing for readers ages 6-to-10), the tone (it's a funny title, so the book should be funny too), some key characters (a girl named Anna Banana and, of course, her best friend) and even the central conflict (a fight huge enough to threaten their friendship). But despite all that the title provided, the idea still lacked a certain critical something – the something that would give the book its heart.

Walking my dog in Prospect Park (because, when in doubt, walk it out), I realized exactly what was missing: a comma. This wasn't a story about a girl named Anna Banana. It was a story about a girl named Anna and her wiener dog, Banana. The dog would provide the cuteness, warmth, emotional resonance and appeal my story needed. I added a dog, and everything else fell into place.

I still had to write the darn thing, word by word, which is another hard truth about writing – even once you know what the story will be, it doesn't just write itself. But I found that the add-a-dog rule helps with that too. If you want to signal to the reader that the hour is late, or that you know the chapter is dragging, have the dog stretch and yawn. If you need to make things more exciting, let the dog stir up trouble. If you aim to tug readers' heartstrings so hard that a few might break – and get your book on award lists and best-seller lists in the process – well, you've heard the advice "Kill your darlings," right? So kiss that pooch goodbye.

(Don't worry, readers. I'm not that

literary. Banana will live forever.)

Try it. Add a dog to the next thing you write, be it a novel, an essay on writing, a text to your spouse, a recipe or erotica. (What? Dogs love food and humping.)

What I'm really saying is: Find the thing that makes the story matter, not in general, but to you. Find that heart and let it guide you. For me, it was a dog. But I've noticed on the Internet that other people prefer cats. That's fine too, I guess. After all, if you're a good enough writer, you can bend any rule.

That's what my dog says, anyway. 

Anica Mrose Rissi is a former executive editor in children's book publishing and the author of *Anna, Banana, and the Friendship Split*. Her personal essays have been published on nytimes.com.

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Walk-ons

How can you make secondary characters pop off the page?

At a science fiction convention some years ago, a famous writer (to remain nameless) was giving a talk about creating a character. “You must make the character come to life from the very first word,” he opined.

From the audience, a second famous writer called out: “Marley was dead: to begin with” – the opening line of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Much hilarity ensued.

But the advice is good. Your character should come to life the second he or she emerges from the wings. Even the merest walk-on deserves a recognizable presence. This serves, to borrow from W. S. Gilbert, to “give artistic verisimilitude to the otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.”

Just as the world you create in your story must become a real world for the reader, its characters must be real people. But the real world assaults the senses every moment with hundreds of sights, smells and sounds, and real people display dozens of little details of appearance, dress, carriage and attitude. If asked, you could tell more about any random passerby than you realize.

We fictioneers must carefully select a few details from these many possibilities so the reader’s imagination will fill in the rest. I suggest picking these details from the three categories of milieu, mannerisms and motivation (because I like the alliteration).

MILIEU Where the character comes from; his or her background, ethnicity

and recent past. This can be shown by dress, speech or physical appearance (avoiding any racial stereotypes). As Robert Heinlein observed, all clothing is costume worn to let the character better fit in to his or her part. If the dress is a uniform, so much the easier. We already know something of the background of a soldier, a cop or a priest.

MANNERISMS Behavior, appearance and any little quirks that distinguish a character from everybody else. These are sometimes called “funny hats” in the trade and can be as common as scratching an ear or as original as carrying around a snare drum to beat on every time he or she tells a bad pun.



MOTIVATION What is the character doing there now, and why? You introduce a character to do something for the plot, to pass on a needed bit of information perhaps or to drive the hero to the airport. But what's the reason for being there? If we meet the character doing his or her job – driving a taxi, teaching school, investigating a crime scene – enough said. But if not, tell us why he or she happens to be there. “My class in prehuman religion is right down the hall, so I thought I’d pop in and – ”

Your main characters won’t present a problem. Since the story is about them, all will be revealed as the story unfolds. With minor characters, enough information to set them in place can be established in a sentence or two, increasing the richness of the backdrop your heroes and/or villains are wandering through.

For instance, let’s say a man is enter-

ing a police station to report a murder. Set the station in Queens, New York, and make the man an Irish priest from a small parish in the area and we have an image, the three Ms all established.

Or:

“498 Seventh Avenue, driver,” I said, sliding into the back seat of the cab. “As fast as you can manage!”

The cabby, a skinny guy with a prominent nose and a walrus mustache, took his flat cap off and scratched a corner of his fringe of hair. “Waddya say I go tru da park,” he said. “In at 72nd out at 7th and straight down?”

“If you say so,” I agreed.

“Udderwise, if we go down Fifth, we’ll hit all da crosstown traffic funder down,” he explained.

His motivation is clear, to get his passenger downtown, and he’s clearly an experienced driver who knows the best

way. His milieu and mannerisms come through in his actions and dialogue (which I pushed a little to make the point). Incidentally, consider what image would be created – and how I’d have to change the dialogue – if he wore a different hat: give him a fez, say, or a bucket hat, or a turban.

And I think his brief appearance in the story creates an aura that spreads out from him and his cab to help add color to the city beyond.

When you introduce the most minor character, a walk-on who doesn’t even get named in the credits, put some spark of life in him or her. Your story will be richer for it. ■

Michael Kurland is the author of more than 30 novels, many of them mysteries, and has been nominated for two Edgars and the American Book Award. His latest novel is *Who Thinks Evil*.

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Laura Ciociola

Pure WRITER

By Elfrieda Abbe

JULIANNA
BAGGOTT
DEVELOPS
CROSS-
GENRE
STORIES
OF HOPE,
FAITH AND
LOVE.

JULIANNA BAGGOTT'S young adult novel, *Pure*, begins with a power paragraph.

"Pressia is lying in the cabinet. This is where she'll sleep once she turns sixteen in two weeks – the tight press of blackened plywood pinching her shoulders, the muffled air, the stalled motes of ash. She'll have to be good to survive this – good and quiet, and, at night when OSR patrols the street, hidden."

In a good novel, the first five words make you forget you're reading, wrote John Gardner. In six words, Baggott compelled me to read on. By the end of the paragraph, the printed page dropped away, and I was immersed in Pressia's damaged world.

The paragraph fulfills another requirement of good writing: It leaves us with questions. Why is she hiding in this burned-out place? What does turning 16 have to do with it? Who or what are OSR patrols? The promise is that the author will deliver the answers.

The scope of Baggott's imagination is breathtaking, and it's impossible to pin her work to one genre. In *Pure*, she creates a "narrative that owes as much to fairy tale and myth as it does to science fiction," wrote reviewer Clare Clark in the *New York Times*.

The writing pulls us into a strange mutilated world where nuclear blasts called "Detonations" divide humankind into the Pures, untouched survivors who live protected under the Dome, and the damaged "wretches" who live outside the Dome. These survivors are disfigured in bizarre ways, fused to other objects, people or animals by the force and heat of the explosions. A doll's head is fused to Pressia's hand. Birds are fused to the back of another character, and another carries his younger brother attached to his back. At the same time, under the sterile Dome, the young Pures are "coded" to create super physical powers and obedient behavior and are being trained as soldiers.

The humanity of the characters overcomes any initial resistance a reader might have to such grotesqueries. "When people say that *Pure* is too bleak for them, I refuse to apologize. What we've done to our fellow man is far more horrific than anything I wrote. *Pure* isn't about the apocalypse. It's about what endures – hope, faith, love," Baggott told Roxanne Gay in an interview for therumpus.net.

Baggott is a prolific writer. She has authored 22 books, including novels for adults and young adults, children's books and books of poetry. Her short stories and essays are widely published in literary and general interest publications. Two early novels for adults, *Girl Talk* and *The Miss America*

"Fiction writers should read poetry for two reasons. First, poets often write epiphanies, and beautifully so. Second, poets choose one image and really rely on it to stain the reader's mind."

Family, were best-sellers. *Pure* was a 2012 *New York Times* Notable Book.

The output is so great she uses two pseudonyms: N. E. Bode for children and Bridget Asher, for what she calls commercial work. A review in Kirkus of her 2015 Asher novel *All of Us and Everything* praises her "unique voice."

Baggott not only writes across genres but also across generations. After I read *Harriet Wolf's Seventh Book of Wonders*, a *New York Times* Editor's Choice for adult readers, I found myself recommending it to my teenage granddaughter. Likewise, I recommended *Pure* to some adult friends who enjoy futuristic themes.

"Julianna has stunningly protean gifts as a writer," said Robert Olen Butler, creative writing professor at Florida State University, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of 12 novels and one nonfiction book *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction* (a bible among MFA students). Butler calls *Harriet Wolf* a "metafictional, family fictional, love-story fictional and literary fictional."

"Not that all these elements stand out individually," he said. "Her genius is to do all that and make it seamlessly whole. Unified, I'd say, by her unique vision of things. Through her entire oeuvre, under her various shape-shifting writing names, she is smart and complex and full of human yearning and at times funny as hell."

In *Harriet Wolf*, Baggott explores the "real" world of lost

love, broken marriages, neglected children and mother-daughter conflicts. Disturbing in parts? Yes. But dreary it's not. Absurd, funny and life-affirming? Absolutely. There's a wild mind at work in this sprawling family story that spans the 20th century and three generations.

The novel begins: "This is how the story goes: I was born dead – or so my mother was told." It misses Gardner's five-word rule, but who can stop reading there?

The reclusive author Harriet Wolf, who has written a beloved six-book series, retreats into a fictional world to avoid the pain of her childhood spent in the "stink and misery" of the Maryland School for Feeble Minded Children. She was placed there by mistake until a doctor discovered she was actually a genius. She has secrets – plenty of them, which she reveals in a letter to her daughter and two granddaughters to be read after her death. It's a love story and mystery intertwined. The question plaguing family and fans is whether a manuscript for the seventh and final book exists, and if so, where is it?

Part of Baggott's particular skill lies in making the right choices for voice and perspective. In *Pure*, she alternates the point of view between several characters but stays in close-third person. For *Harriet Wolf*, she uses four first-person storytellers: Harriet; her daughter Eleanor, who sees danger everywhere; Eleanor's angry, rebellious daughter Ruth, who returns home after her mother falls ill to rescue her younger sister Tilton; and the childlike Tilton, who, confined to the house by her overprotective mother, explains the world around her in lyrical language befitting a poet.

In *Letters to a Young Novelist*, Mario Vargas Llosa wrote: "All fictions are structures of fantasy and craft erected around certain acts, people, or circumstances that stand out in the writer's memory and stimulate his imagination."

How is writing young adult novels different from writing for adults?

No difference. Each novel teaches me how to write it, and before I can truly understand what I'm writing, I need to imagine the one person to whom I'm whispering the story urgently. Sometimes that person is an adult, sometimes my oldest daughter, as it was with *Pure*, and sometimes a childhood version of myself. The ear receiving the story changes, but once it's chosen, the story becomes far easier to write. That said, I could write two hundred pages and not

quite yet know. Those are dangerous, messy pages that will change drastically.

The beginning of *Pure* makes a strong visual impact. What inspired these vivid details?

The ash and coal dust that's found throughout *Pure* comes from my father's childhood. He was raised in West Virginia and talked of snow turning gray before hitting the ground. The grandfather who's missing a leg is based on my own grandfather, who was a double-amputee from World War II. His stump wasn't clotted in wires, but it was calloused. It made a huge

Baggott told me that she could put her finger down in one of her own books and, in the spirit of Vargas Llosa, know what experience in her life that line came from. “Certainly I rummage through my daily life in my work,” she said. “I have a lot of little obsessions, a lot of things I want to stitch together.” That’s not to say her work is autobiographical, only that memories fuel her imagination.

For example, Baggott remembers stories her grandmother told of being in and out of children’s homes when she was a child, which led the author to investigate a defunct school for the so-called “feeble minded” children. Access to the buildings, grounds and archives yielded details she needed to create the fictional institution.

Memories of the fear of nuclear attack during the Cold War and Civil Defense school drills led her to research Hiroshima and Nagasaki while drafting *Pure*. (Pressia is half Japanese.)

Baggott also collects scrapes of information: observations, conversations, newspaper stories and odd events. “It’s not unusual for me to have notes all over my hands while I’m teaching,” said Baggott, who is on the faculty of College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband and creative business partner, David Scott, and their children. She also travels throughout the year to teach at Florida State University’s College of Motion Picture Arts.

If you walked into her home office, you might find stacks of paper notes in bins labeled “contemporary,” “comedic,” “otherworldly.” “If there’s a novel I can’t get to, I throw ideas for it into a bin so I can work on it later,” she said. “For *Pure*, I used a number of failed short stories to help create the world and its characters. Failed works become part of a junkyard of sorts that can be very fertile terrain.”

A freewheeling imagination is her gift; a highly disciplined approach to writing is her craft. She hones her worlds with precise, cinematic language. Reading *Pure*, I felt at times like I was watching a movie. Each detail helps build a

flesh-and-blood character and a world the reader will believe in and enter. She attributes her intentionality to reading and writing poetry.

“Fiction writers should read poetry for two reasons,” she said. “First, poets often write epiphanies, and beautifully so. Second, poets choose one image and really rely on it to stain the reader’s mind. Before I studied poetry, I had less confidence in the power of the image and would clutter the page, piling them on. Poetry teaches the power of restraint,” she said.

As an MFA student, Baggott was “an absolute original writer who celebrated and investigated the role imagination played in saving and destroying people,” said Lee Zacharias, author of the memoir *The Only Sounds We Make*. She directed Baggott’s MFA thesis at North Carolina University at Greensboro, where she is now professor emerita. “She was a pioneer in constructing a world in which the real and the imaginative co-exist. Her stories were magical – not in the sense of science fiction or magical realism – but in their assumptions: They might begin at a time when man was so new most had just outgrown their gills or one’s parents might become woolly and hooved over and evolve into sheep or a sandman might live in dusty drawers left over from childhood.”

Throughout several phone and email conversations, Baggott was open and generous, ready to address any question. She talked about her creative process and sources of inspiration, writing for teens and adults, and people who have helped her. We didn’t meet face-to-face, but I was struck by a kind of bright energy that came through in her voice. Near the end of our talks, I asked: “Why do you write?”

“I could write a book in response – everything from watching one of my grandmothers lose her memory and becoming a hoarder of stories to the chip on my shoulder to my field hockey days to my Southern roots – but on the simplest level, it’s how I breathe,” she said.

impact on me as a child. The small fan whirring in [her grandfather’s] throat comes from my grandmother who needed a fan on her while she lay naked in a hospital bed in a hospice home. I write a lot from what’s been stored in my memory.

What gave you the idea for Pressia’s disfigured hand?

My house is filled with toys. I used to be an athlete. From across the room, I shoot toys – including baby dolls – into the toy box. One day, I palmed a baby-doll head. The idea of a doll’s head fused to a fist

struck. I was reading George Saunders and Aimee Bender at the time and wrote a failed short story about a 23-year-old woman with this affliction. But at the same time, I was feeling visually restless, cinematically ambitious and once I started to world-build, Pressia found the story in which she truly belonged.

How do you decide on the first words of a novel?

If I feel there’s not something going on that I’m in love with, I can’t go forward. I have to have a feeling that there’s a good foundation where the

language is interesting to me and there’s some texture on the page. Once I have that feeling, I can start writing forward.

A bit of writing advice from John Irving: The intrigue for the reader turns from what will happen to how it will happen, which I find richer.

What advice do you give your students about beginnings?

I quote novelist Valerie Martin, who wrote, “The desire at the start is not to say anything, not to make meanings, but to create for the unwary reader a

"Each novel teaches me how to write it, but what I learn about my process follows me from project to project — even as my process evolves."

sudden experience of reality." Of course, I also suggest sometimes that they tell the plot — spill it. If there's going to be a dead body, mention the dead body, and then the reader will be patient because you've made a promise.

Once you're happy with the beginning, do you go forward, revise?

Eventually, I stop looking back and being prissy about the beginning, but I'm pretty prissy about it for a long while. At a certain point, I only go forward. I allow myself to write a chunk where I can say, "You know, I don't know what I'm really doing here. It's a bit messy." I cut myself some slack. I can also write with blind spots where I say, "I know I'm going to have to figure this out later. I don't know what the answer is right now, but that's OK," and I can keep writing.

In *Harriet Wolf's Seventh Book of Wonders* and *Pure*, you create a vivid sense of place that is a physical and a powerful psychological presence in the reader's mind. How do you achieve that?

Funny. I'm struggling right now with a world I'm trying to build, and it's stalled me. I have to nail it down and dig in deeply before I can write another word. Writers are such heady creatures that we often forget our characters have bodies and senses. To fully imagine a life, one has to supply undeniable details about the exterior world so that when the novelist has to make the truly improbable leap to the interior world of another human being, the reader is primed to believe us.

What's an example of an "undeniable truth?"

The barbershop in *Pure* offered a lot of details of the old world: blue Barbasol, shaving cream canisters, white smocks

that snap at the neck. In choosing a specific location, not just a lean-to, I was allowed to draw on those details and allow them to build the world around the characters.

You lecture on "efficient creativity." What do you mean by that phrase?

Putting those two words together makes people nervous because people feel you can't force ideas. However, you can acknowledge the environment that [sparked your imagination]. Were you listening to music? Who did you just talk to? Were you being physically active? The main thing for writers and for those who are innovative in different ways is to acknowledge you have a creative process. Take a moment to lift your head and look at that environment. The more you can work with it rather than against it, the better. Creative people don't want to think about their creative process. They like to think about it as the muse and not mess with it, which I think is counterproductive.

How does that work for you?

I've asked myself these questions, and I know that when my brain cells are freshest. I protect that time. I know when I'm in a good mood, I'm more generative. When in a foul mood, I should be editing. I know that I can plot to music, but not write to it. I know when to take a walk with my husband and talk through the story. I know when to hand something off and when to hold it close. Perhaps most importantly, I know when to eat dark chocolate.

My process has gotten better over the years because I've become aware of it, and bow to it. As I said earlier, each novel teaches me how to write it, but what I learn about my process follows

me from project to project — even as my process evolves — and being aware of it is a great advantage.

What is your writing process?

If we believe the idea that it takes 10,000 hours of dedication to get to the height of your craft, I wasn't going to get [those] hours while sitting at a computer. I have four kids [8 to 20 years old] and my life is very demanding, loud, messy and chaotic. I had to get into these spaces mentally where I was creating and visualizing scenes while cutting vegetables, driving in a car pool or waiting for somebody's soccer practice to be finished. If I found myself thinking about things that were not really important, I would stop myself and envision a scene. I would envision it again, something else [in the scene] would happen. By the time I got to the computer, I would be four drafts into the process. Making that a practice has made my work more visual. I'm a much more visual writer than if I were sitting at a desk, which tends to make me more of a language writer.

Who or what has influenced your writing?

My mother told family stories that were, by and large, of the Southern Gothic tradition. Combine that with our Catholicism — a highly vivid religion where the Passion of Christ is portrayed in great detail — and there is no denying a Flannery O'Connor influence. I adore her brutality. Hemingway may have been running with the bulls, but he strikes me as a soft romantic compared to O'Connor. I was influenced by playwrights — Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Neil Simon. I really developed my ear while going to theater as a kid, and of course, Mamet taught

me how to curse. Later, I was influenced by poets like Marie Howe, whose work in particular taught me a lot about how a narrative takes form, moment to moment, spanning a book-length work. Poets are great teachers of the power of a singular image and how to write epiphany. I've also loved many magical realists.

Have you had writing mentors and, if so, how have they helped you?

Fred Chappell and Lee Zacharias profoundly affected me as a writer in graduate school. Lee was very hands-on about character and structure. Fred's magical realism and his ability to write both brutality and humor were important to me. He modeled cross-genre writing and, in retrospect, that became vital. He read our work in class, which resonated with me deeply because I write so much from what is in the air, aloud. Reading aloud makes it painfully clear what parts are alive and which dead on the page. Mainly, however, he was generous with his spirit. It's hard to explain that quality in a teacher, but the ones who see you as a fellow sufferer make a difference.

What do you do when you're not writing?

My husband is always terrified when I finish a project, and my kids don't care for it either. I become overly interested in my children's lives and the messy house. Writing allows me to control one world. When I'm not doing that, I go off and try to control parts of my own world or other people's lives. The Catch-22 is that I do get tired of writing and have to find ways and be intentional about walking away. Having four kids is great for me because they don't allow me to write all the time, and they keep me in balance. 

Elfrieda Abbe is a Wisconsin-based freelance writer, editor and book critic. She was formerly the editor and publisher of this magazine.

→An excerpt from *Pure* by Julianna Baggott

Pressia: Cabinets

PRESSIA IS LYING IN THE CABINET. This is where she'll sleep once she turns sixteen in two weeks — the tight press of blackened plywood pinching her shoulders, the muffled air, the stalled motes of ash. She'll have to be good to survive this — good and quiet and, at night when OSR patrols the streets, hidden.

She nudges the door open with her elbow, and there sits her grandfather, settled into his chair next to the alley door. The fan lodged in his throat whirs quietly; the small plastic blades spin one way when he draws in a breath and the opposite way when he breathes out. She's so used to the fan that she'll go months without really noticing it, but then there will be a moment, like this one, when she feels disengaged from her life and everything surprises.

"So, do you think you can sleep in there?" he asks. "Do you like it?"

She hates the cabinet, but she doesn't want to hurt his feelings. "I feel like a comb in a box," she says. They live in the back storage room of a burned-out barbershop. It's a small room with a table, two chairs, two old pallets on the floor, one where her grandfather now sleeps and her old one, and a handmade birdcage hung from a hook in the ceiling. They come and go through the storage room's back door, which leads to an alley. During the Before, this cabinet held barbershop supplies — boxes of black combs, bottles of blue Barbasol, shaving-cream canisters, neatly folded hand towels, white smocks that snapped around the neck. She's pretty sure that she'll have dreams of being blue Barbasol trapped in a bottle.

Her grandfather starts coughing; the fan spins wildly. His face flushes to a rubied purple. Pressia climbs out of the cabinet, walks quickly to him, and claps him on the back, pounds his ribs. Because of the cough, people have stopped coming around for his services — he was a mortician during the Before and then became known as the flesh-tailor, applying his skills with the dead to the living. She used to help him keep the wounds clean with alcohol, line up the instruments, sometimes helping hold down a kid who was flailing. Now people think he's infected.

Excerpt reprinted with permission from Julianna Baggott © 2012, Grand Central Publishing.

BY MARGARET MEACHAM

5 terrible, HORRIBLE, No Good, VERYBAD MISTAKES

Working on a book for young readers? Here's what not to do.

Most writers I know, in fact, most people I know, think about writing a children's book at some point in their careers. Sometimes they remember how much they loved books from childhood. Sometimes they see how books can open doors for kids and help them think in new ways. Sometimes they know that the right book at the right time can help a lonely child feel less alone.

In my (decade plus) years of teaching Writing

Children's Books through Gotham Writers' Workshop, I've worked with hundreds of students. Most are delightful people, and many are talented writers, but when each new class begins, I know I will encounter many of the same misconceptions I saw in the last class and that a lot of my time will be spent helping students avoid or correct the same mistakes.

If you want to write a children's book, consider the following misconceptions and their corrections before you begin.



MISTAKE #1 CLUELESSNESS



Misconception: “I haven’t read a children’s book in years, but they’re short and simple, right? How hard can it be to write one?”

The truth is children’s books are no easier to write than books for adults. Books for older children demand all the elements that books for adults do: strong characterizations, fresh exciting plots, lots of action and clear, precise language, as well as the ability to see the world through a child’s eyes, mind and heart.

Picture books may be short, and they may appear deceptively simple, but they are one of the most difficult forms to master. Well-written picture books are works of art that demand an intuitive sense of child appeal, and like poetry, a firm command of language.

Because the kind of book that would appeal to a 3-year-old is vastly different from one that appeals to a 10-year-old or a 14-year-old, books for children and teens come in many formats. It’s crucial to understand the field of children’s books, to know the various categories and formats and to read widely in the category you’re targeting.

Would your story work best as a picture book, an easy reader, an early chapter

book or a middle grade novel? Knowing the conventions and requirements of each format before you begin will save time when it comes to revising. Although these categories are fluid and the age levels are indicative rather than definitive, these are the standards devised and currently used by the publishing industry, librarians, educators and reviewers.

Here are the major categories.

Baby/Toddler Books (ages 0-3)

As a child’s first books, these come in all shapes and sizes, but usually have very few words per page. Unless you are an artist or have a brilliant idea that hasn’t been produced before, this market is hard to crack.

Picture Books (ages 2-8)

Text and pictures work together to tell a story. At their best, picture books are sophisticated works of art that work on many levels and help children grow emotionally and psychologically. A few picture books have no words at all, allowing the pictures to tell the story, and most are no longer than 1,000 words. Most picture books are 32 pages long, including the cover pages.

EZ Readers (ages 4-7)

Aimed at beginning readers, these books have limited vocabulary, large typeface, simple sentence structure, repetition and pictures that give clues to the words to help children learn to read alone.

Chapter Books (ages 6-9)

A little longer and more difficult than easy readers, these

Mistaking success

Worried about making too many terrible, horrible, no good, very bad mistakes with your children’s or YA book? Let us offer you encouragement to make mistakes along the way. Playwright George Bernard Shaw said:

“Success does not consist in never making mistakes but in never making the same one a second time.” And more broadly he said: “A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but more useful than a life spent doing nothing.” You may want to avoid the mistakes cited in this story, but mistakes can lead to discovery, and discovery can lead to success. Keep writing – straight through the mistakes.

bridge the gap between easy readers and middle grade novels by telling the story primarily through prose rather than pictures.

Middle Grade Books (ages 8-12)

Written for kids whose reading skills are competent, these novels vary in length, subject matter and style, but they should have all the attributes of novels for adults. The biggest difference is that the main characters are usually children. Realistic fiction, fantasy, mysteries and historical fiction are all popular with middle grade readers.

Young Adult (ages 13-18)

Contemporary books for YA readers are sophisticated in style and subject matter and deal with the problems, questions and issues that concern teens in our times.

MISTAKE #2 PREACHINESS



Misconception: “As an adult, I have a lot more experience, and I know a lot more than my child readers know. I want to use my children’s book to teach children and to explain good behavior.”

No one likes being preached to, and kids, who are preached to enough already, *really* don’t like it. As with most readers, kids want books with strong characters and exciting plots. While the best children’s books usually have a theme or a message, that message is shown through the actions and reactions of the characters in response to the plot. In other words, through a good strong story.

Writers who believe that didacticism or writing down to kids has a place in their book should consider the words of the *New Yorker* writer E. B. White, author of *Charlotte’s Web* and other children’s classics: “Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick and generally congenial readers on earth.” That was true when White wrote it, and it’s still true today.

MISTAKE #3 STEREOTYPES



Misconception: “Kids are all the pretty much the same, aren’t they? I haven’t talked to one in years, but they seem pretty straightforward.”

Because you are writing for children and young adults, your most important characters will be kids or teenagers, or, in some cases, bunnies, puppies, witches, ghosts or dragons, most of which are substitutes for kids. In general, kids like to read about characters who are their age or slightly older. If you are writing a story for 9-to-12-year-olds, your main character will probably be 12 or 13. If you are writing for teenagers, your main character will usually be 16 or older.

How does an adult writer create a realistic child or teenage character? You will need many of the same skills writers of adult fiction need: the ability to empathize and an understanding of and curiosity about human nature. In addition, you will need to draw on your own childhood memories and on your observations and understanding of contemporary kids. As Somerset Maugham said, “You can never know enough about your characters.”

You have decided to write about a 12-year-old girl

If you want to write an awesome, amazing, splendid, really good children’s book, let the rumpus begin.

1 Read widely in the format and age level you hope to engage.

2 Spend time with kids close to the age you hope to write for. Talk to them about their lives, their families, relationships, hopes, dreams, frustrations and accomplishments.

3 To get a sense of which POV would work best for you and a sense of the voices of your characters, try the following exercise: Write a scene with two or more child characters, using either first person or third-person limited POV. Rewrite the scene from the other character’s first or third person POV.

4 Give an old story a new twist by choosing an antagonist as your viewpoint character as in *The True Story of the Big Bad Wolf* by John Scieszka or modernizing an old tale as in *The Principal’s New Clothes* by Stephanie Clamenson, or *The Chocolate Touch* by Patrick Skane Catlin.

5 For picture books, think visually. You don’t need to be an artist (your publisher will find an artist if they buy your text), but you do need to plan your story so the pictures work with the text to tell the story. You might even try designing a story in which the pictures tell a different story from the text, as in *Rosie’s Walk* by Pat Hutchins, or *Officer Buckle and Gloria* by Peggry Rathbone.

Books for older children demand all the elements that books for adults do: strong characterizations, fresh exciting plots, lots of action and clear, precise language. Many people think that because picture books are so short, they must be easy, but in reality the picture book is one of the most difficult forms to master.

named Jessie. You know that she has curly brown hair, green eyes and a lopsided smile. But knowing your character means more than just knowing her name, age and what she looks like. You need to know who her parents are, if she has brothers and sisters, whether she is shy or outgoing. Does she have a best friend, or is she lonely? Does she get good grades, or does she struggle

in school? What are her favorite books, TV shows, foods, sports? What kind of clothes does she wear, and what is the décor of her room? In the process of asking and answering these questions and others like them, you will get to know your main character.

What is it in your character’s background or personality that makes him or her act as he or she does? Twelve-

year-old Carter has always been an A student, but suddenly he’s failing math. Why? Is it because he hates his math teacher, his parents are getting divorced or he has a crush on the girl sitting next to him in class? It’s up to you to understand your main character and provide sufficient motivation so that his or her actions will seem logical and believable.

One way to do this is to use the same techniques as actors playing a part. If you want to show that your character is angry, try to recall a situation in which you yourself felt anger and tap into those emotions. The situation need not be the same, but the emotions you felt will be, and you will create characters who resonate emotionally with your readers.

MISTAKE #4 POV CONFUSION



Misconception: “Point of view? What does that have to do with kid’s books?”

I’m constantly surprised by how many of my students don’t understand the concept of point of view as it applies to fiction. The fact is, when writing for kids, understanding how the various POV choices work is crucial. When you are able to put yourself inside your middle grade or YA character, in either a first-person or third-

person limited point of view, when you really allow your readers to see the world through your character's eyes, mind and heart, you will have gone a long way toward capturing and holding your readers' attention.

In the past, most kids' books, indeed, most books in general, used an omniscient point of view in which the story is told by a voice that is separate from the characters, remains outside the story and knows everything about the characters and the events of the story. While picture books are still often told in an omniscient voice, books for older kids and YAs usually use either a first-person or a third-person limited point of view.

When you write in the

first person, you are telling the story in the voice of one of your characters, usually, but not always, the main character. If, for example, I am telling the story of 13-year-old Tom in the first person from Tom's viewpoint, I might write, "When I left school that afternoon, I had no clue what was waiting for me at home." If I decided instead to tell Tom's story in the third-person limited, I would write, "When Tom left school that afternoon, he had no idea what was waiting for him at home." In both cases, we are seeing the world from the perspective of the main character, and we feel an immediate connection to that character.

An advantage of the first person and third-person

In books for kids, it's important to hook your readers right away by introducing the central conflict early in the story.

limited is that they create a sense of connection to the narrator and hence a direct and intimate connection between reader and writer. Readers, especially older kids and YA readers, are then able to identify strongly with the

main character and to care deeply about what will happen to him or her.

Many authors choose to tell a story from more than one character's first person or third-person limited POV, but it's important to make sure the transitions between viewpoint characters are clearly delineated, usually by alternating chapters or larger parts of a story.

This avoids abrupt shifts in viewpoint, or head hopping, which is jarring and confusing to readers.

Some contemporary authors do use an omniscient POV, but usually they have created a strong omniscient voice that acts almost as a character in itself, as the narrator in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

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MISTAKE #5 LACK OF SUSPENSE



Misconception: “Conflict? Suspense? Tension? I know mystery stories and crime novels need those things, but children’s books? You’re telling me *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Cat in the Hat* have conflict and suspense?”

Yup. And that’s why kids have been happily turning those pages for decades. Peter

is in conflict with Farmer MacGregor, and also at times with his mom, and with himself. The suspense and tension come from wondering if Peter will be caught stealing vegetables from Farmer MacGregor’s garden and “put into a pie like his father.”

In *The Cat in the Hat*, the conflict is between the cat and the two children, and the suspense comes from watching the cat wreak havoc on the children’s home and wondering how they’ll ever get the mess cleaned up before Mom comes back.

Cute animals and rhyming verse may play a part in your tale, but they don’t take the place of a real story complete with suspense, tension and an actual plot.

Readers need characters

they care about and reasons to worry about them. That’s what keeps them turning pages.

Conflict provides the reasons to worry. Give your characters problems, get them into trouble, then have them set about solving their problems and getting out of trouble.

In books for kids, it’s important to hook your readers right away by introducing the central conflict early in the story and then to keep them hooked by showing your character struggling throughout the story to solve the problem and/or achieve the goal.

It’s also important to avoid a deus-ex-machina in the form of a parent, teacher or helpful adult who steps in to save the day. The main character should solve the problem, even if that character is a

3-year-old child or a teeny-tiny mouse.

Creating strong characters, finding the right voice, coming up with a workable plot – these are not easy tasks, and the road from initial conception to a publishable story is usually long, winding, full of potholes and pitfalls. But when I hear from a child that he or she loved a book and wants to read more, or that one of my books has made any child feel less alone, I know that the journey is more than worth it. 

Margaret Meacham and has written 11 books for children and young adults including *Oyster Moon* and *A Fairy’s Guide to Understanding Humans*. She teaches Children’s Book Writing at Gotham Writers’ Workshop.

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DUAL POWER

In 2014, police officers choked Eric Gardner to death in New York City, shot and killed John Crawford in Beavercreek, Ohio, and shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Saddened and angered by the tragic deaths, **Jason Reynolds** and **Brendan Kiely** used their most potent weapon, storytelling, to write *All American Boys* about two young men caught in a police brutality incident. Before the authors began writing, they established a three-point policy to set the tone for the work. One: If the friendship fails, the book will fail. Two: If the book is wildly successful, they will donate money to organizations aligned with their theme. Three: If a publishing company does not publish it, they will publish it themselves on the Internet. (Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books published it in September 2015.) Here the writers reflect on their process and partnership.

INTERVIEW BY / **MEGAN KAPLON**

PHOTO BY / **JAKE BELCHER**





■ MALE CHARACTERS

BK There are many books out there with male lead characters where the book is action, action, action. “I do something” and “I conquer something” and “I beat something.” I think it’s really important to write books that are about boys where the entire narrative arc is about emotion, because boys have emotional landscapes, too, and often they aren’t taught to think about that.

■ PARTNERSHIP

JR Other than the writing, there was another level of process that had mostly to do with who wasn’t doing the writing. I’m *not* writing half of this book, and I have to trust that whatever this person is writing, he’s doing it to the best of his abilities, and he’s doing it with the intention that we set out.

■ POV

BK Kids grapple with the immediacies of their life because they aren’t out there in the world in the same way as adults. Their world is pretty close. So writing in first person makes sense because that’s the way kids speak and relate.

■ SLANG

JR You can’t overuse it because then it becomes clownish, but it’s always helpful to use some. It colors the work a bit. It adds some edge and some oomph.

■ DIALOGUE

BK I try to throw in as much broken, fragmented dialogue as possible. As you’re drafting, maybe you notice that the word “like” has popped up too many times on one page, and you begin to cut, but at first, be as broken and real as possible.

■ AGENDA

JR My process is to use characters as host bodies. If there’s an issue that we’re trying to get at, then let me develop a character who has that issue, and he or she will be the host and walk the reader through a period of time, trusting that whatever the host is carrying will show itself without having to be raining down from the hand of God.

■ ADULT DISAPPROVAL

BK A little bit of censorship, a little bit of oppressive control by adults is a good thing because that can inspire kids to care and push back a little bit. A little bit of rebellion is a good thing, especially if they’re channeling it for things like this where it really matters.

Venice reach



San Giorgio Maggiore from
Riva degli Schiavoni, near
Piazza San Marco

BY JACK SMITH

EDITOR'S NOTE: When frequent contributor Jack Smith told us he was going to Venice to research a novel, we asked him to take notes. You may not be setting your book in Venice (although Smith makes a delicious argument in favor of that). But his steps provide a primer for deepening your sense of any setting you may choose and how you spend your time getting to know that setting. Our thought? We'll be watching for how many novels and short stories are inspired by Smith's writerly tour.

"Venice is like eating an entire box of chocolate liqueurs in one go," said Truman Capote

Of course you begin there.

With the crowds.

The pigeons.

Because how can you not? It's famous, grand, stately – Piazza San Marco, Venice's largest square – and there before you, rising up with rare augustness, with majestic splendor: St. Mark's Basilica, the Doge's Palace, the Clock Tower.

And the Campanile.

Although it collapsed in 1902, the Campanile we see today is a reconstructed bell tower based on the 1514 original, where Galileo aimed his tele-

scope over the Adriatic and helped launch the scientific revolution and, with it, the modern world.

The city has a long, fascinating history, way back to the early 5th century, when the Venetians, escaping the marauding Goths, retreated from the mainland and began building on tiny marshy islands in the nearby lagoon.

Over the centuries, Venice grew into a city and a commercial empire. It grew into the powerful Venetian Republic. The 18th century brought decadence. Who shares the stage of famous Venetians right along with Marco Polo? Casanova.

And then, in 1797, Napoleon.



Mary Jane Smith

Venice is sinking and has been for some time – that’s proverbial.

Venice is also subject to *acqua alta*.

That superabundance of water is key to its mystery and charm. After all, there’s something intriguing about all that water and the fact that the city is built on wood pilings. Large, immensely weighty buildings, huge palaces along the Grand Canal, mighty churches and museums throughout this small city – all built on pilings.

A city of 60,000 with millions of tourists each year.

Carnevale di Venezia. A world-famous draw, but only part of its magnetic attraction.

Alluring.

Markedly seductive.

Maybe it’s the magnificent Grand Canal and the way it winds by centuries-old palazzi. Maybe it’s the continual traffic of water buses, water taxis.

Or the iconic gondolas.

So much is iconic about Venice.

So much has caught the attention of writers and movie-makers.

Last summer, I went to Venice, and my imagination recharged. What writer can resist such an enthralling setting for a novel? That’s where our work begins as writers. If you intend to set a novel in Venice, you must think like a fiction writer when you’re there. Map it carefully. Get inside its “head.” Don’t miss one opportunity for storing materials for when you get down to the business of writing.



YOU LAND at the Marco Polo Airport, or you arrive by train. Perhaps you stay on the mainland, in Mestre, the industrial center, as I did, and take the bus over the causeway to Venice, or perhaps you stay in Venice itself – or maybe you stay in the Lido and travel the lagoon each day to Venice.

Wherever you stay, this isn’t solely a vacation. You’re researching a novel, so keep your camera at the ready. A folder of images will serve as a visual journal later. Keep a written journal, too, to record your feelings and thoughts as you tour the city.

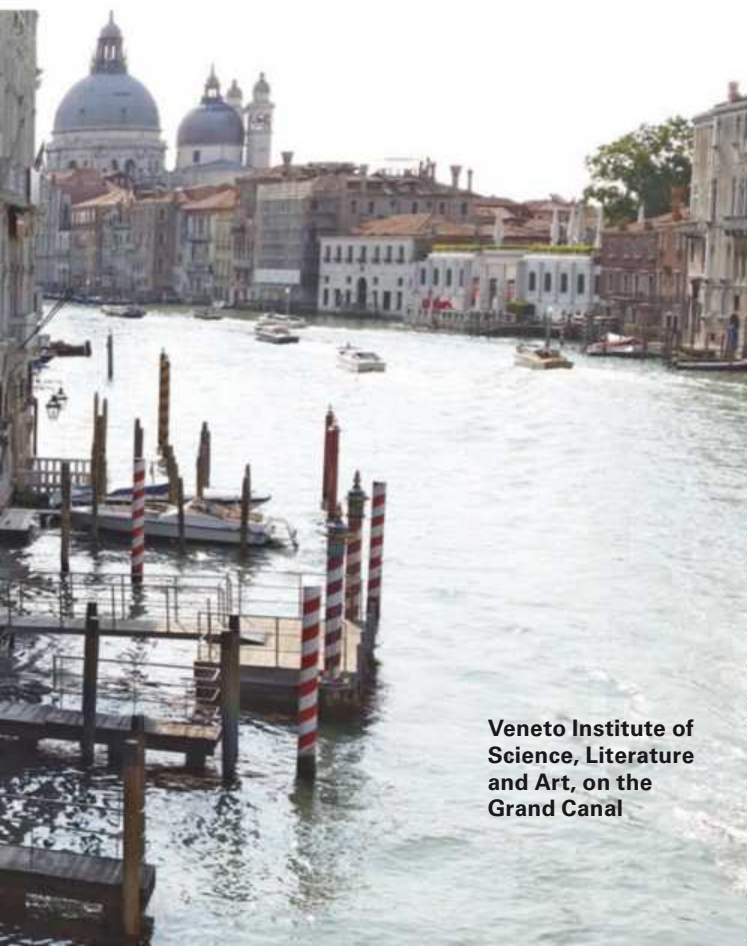
Take a water bus, or *vaporetto*, up the Grand Canal from San Marco so that when you write your novel, you can vividly portray this waterway as well as the centuries-old, four-and-five-story palaces. Stop off at the Rialto Bridge, swarming with tourists. Go up and down the Grand Canal. You can get off at any number of stops – more if you take the slow *vaporetto* (Line #1), fewer if you take the fast one (Line #2). Whichever water-bus you choose, absorb the environment of the canal. Notice how some palaces sit directly in the water, and others have a walkway, or *riva*. As the *vaporetto* chugs by, observe moored water taxis, police and ambulance boats and gondolas. The Grand Canal is Venice’s main waterway, winding 2.5 miles from Piazza San Marco to the Piazzale Roma, where the buses line up, where you’ll see the walking bridge to the train station and where *vaporetto* tickets can be purchased. The canal is perhaps Venice’s chief icon, and if you want to write a novel about Ven-



ice, you must get it down in your bones, sinews, guts, taking in as many sensory details as you can. For helpful setting markers later, photograph vaporetto stops with their locations highlighted in yellow: Accademia, San Tomà, Ca' d'Oro.

As important as the Grand Canal is, other sites will deepen your depiction of the city. If the Grand Canal is the main artery, the narrow canals (*rii*) and streets (*calli*) are the veins. If you stick to the main thoroughfare, with the hot tourist attractions, you'll limit your range. You'll miss the small and large squares (*campi*), the ancient wells, the many outdoor *ristoranti* and *trattorie* (less formal dining), the kiosks loaded with hats, sweatshirts, and trinkets, the shops in narrow *calli*, their windows filled with carnival masks – and, in the midst of a throng of tourists, delivery persons muscling hand trucks loaded with supplies (no motorized delivery trucks in this town). Get to know as much of Venice as you can, pursuing it from *sestiere* to *sestiere* (six districts in all). There are stories to tell, surely, about this *campo* or that, off the well-traveled Grand Canal. Stand at a bridge (*ponte*) and peer down a *rio* at the buildings rising on both sides of the water, or perhaps you'll come upon a *rio* where there is a narrow walkway, a *fondamenta*. There are more than 400 bridges over narrow canals in Venice. Take your time when you come to them. This is the real Venice, off the tourist beat. You'll most likely see a gondola.

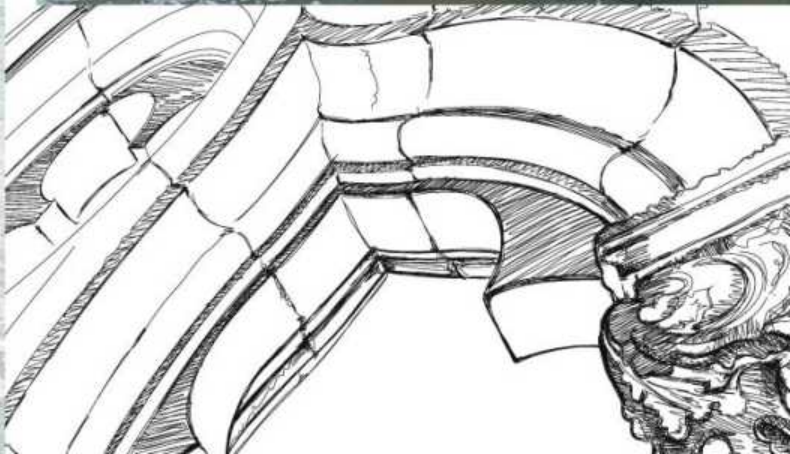
Take in the local cuisine. Get snapshots of menus. If you miss doing so, these are usually available on the Web, and you can get an English translation. Venice is notorious for a lack of



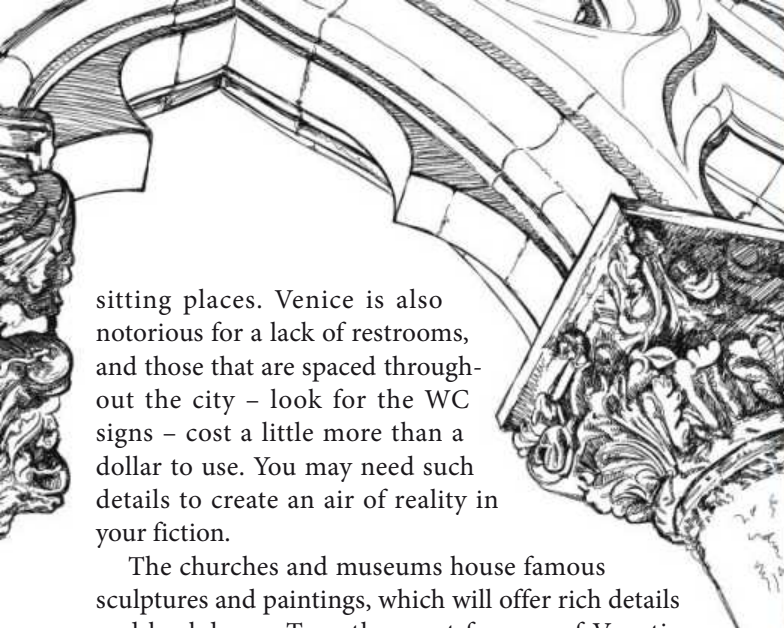
Veneto Institute of Science, Literature and Art, on the Grand Canal



A rio, or small canal that separates the islands of Venice.



Jack Smith



sitting places. Venice is also notorious for a lack of restrooms, and those that are spaced throughout the city – look for the WC signs – cost a little more than a dollar to use. You may need such details to create an air of reality in your fiction.

The churches and museums house famous sculptures and paintings, which will offer rich details and backdrops. Tour the most famous of Venetian churches, the Santa Maria della Salute, built as a votive offering to the Virgin Mary to ward off the Black Death that struck Venice in 1630, killing off a third of the population. The Salute is a storehouse of Renaissance art – Tintoretto, Titian. Venice is a city famous for its art. Don't miss the Gallerie dell'Accademia, known simply as Accademia. Yes, your novel's setting could be limited largely to the picture postcard sights of San Marco, the Rialto Bridge, the Grand Canal – *and* the Riva degli Schiavoni, the wide, touristy promenade (Venice's counterpart to Paris' Champs-Élysées) facing St. Mark's Basin. But even so, in visiting churches and art museums, you will gather a sense of Venice's distinctive cultural past and the character of its present, heavily imbued with that past.

Consult art and architecture books to gain a helpful overview of sites you've been to as well as ones you've missed. Don't leave out the music or the performing arts. Listen to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Listen to or watch *Tristan und Isolde* by Strauss, who completed the second act in Venice. Attend an opera at the Teatro La Fenice, Venice's famous opera house, which burned in 1996, but was renovated to appear just as it was when Shelley, Byron, James, Browning and many other literary figures were in Venice. Being in this magnificent opera house is a trip into the past. Take all the pictures you want – no one will stop you. If one of the settings in your novel is the Fenice, you'll be able to describe its interior.

But what about the interiors of Venice's many magnificent palazzi? Unless you can land an invitation to a party – it took poet Joseph Brodsky 17 winter visits to get invited a time or two – you'll have to depend on books and the Web. In both venues, you'll discover very helpful four-color photos of exteriors and interiors of Venetian palaces.

Before going to Venice, or as a follow-up – preferably before – read as many historical accounts as you can, consult guidebooks and maps, watch videos on YouTube and don't neglect the many movies set in Venice, including *Summer-time*, *Death in Venice*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Tourist* and *Casanova*. These are great for



Jack Smith

visual material, and they're likely to charge your imagination. Read a stack of novels. How do published novelists handle the Venetian setting? How do they create both exterior views and interior ones and do it masterfully?



START WITH Thomas Mann's classic *Death in Venice*, published in 1912. Here is a complex literary novella that garnered considerable scholarly interpretation and criticism, and yet the storyline itself is fairly simple.

Gustav Aschenbach, an acclaimed German writer, vacations in the Lido. At the Grand Hotel Des Bains, a former luxury hotel, Aschenbach notices a boy, about age 14, who epitomizes, he believes, classical Greek beauty. He soon becomes "intoxicated" with this boy's beauty, and his whole stay in



Rio with
fondamente

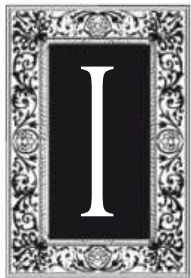
Venice is dominated by his need to be near this boy, Tadzio, who's summering with his Polish family at the same upscale hotel. Aschenbach not only keeps the boy in sight as much as he can, in the hotel, on the beach, but also follows him at a safe distance when the family tours Venice. Being near the boy becomes, for him, an all-consuming need. At the novel's end, Aschenbach dies from cholera, a pestilence that has been concealed by the Venetian authorities, who are concerned about a loss of tourism.

The critical discussion on this novella centers on the nature of the ideal, the conflict between the Dionysian (heightened emotional revelry) versus the Apollonian (rational restraint), the complex relationship between narrator and protagonist, Aschenbach's homosexuality, Mann's own homosexuality – and pederasty. But we won't concern ourselves with digging into the various scholarly discussions and debates. Instead, let's focus on Mann's artistic handling of setting.

In the following excerpt, Aschenbach observes the deeply sensuous nature of the Venetian watery environs.

The air was still, and it smelled. The sun burned heavily through a haze that gave the sky the color of slate. Water gurgled against wood and stone. The cry of the gondolier, half warning and half greeting, received distant answer from out of the silent labyrinth as if by mysterious arrangement. Umbels of flowers hung down over crumbling walls from small gardens on higher ground. They were white and purple and smelled like almonds. Moorish window casings showed their forms in the haze. The marble steps of a church descended into the waters; a beggar crouching there and asserting his misery held out his hat and showed the whites of his eyes as if he were blind; a dealer in antiques stood before

his cavalike shop and with fawning gestures invited the passerby to stop, hoping for a chance to swindle him. That was Venice, that coquettish, dubious beauty of a city, half fairy tale and half tourist trap, in whose noisome air the fine arts once thrived luxuriantly and where musicians were inspired to create sounds that cradle the listener and seductively rock him to sleep.



IN TYPICAL MANN FASHION, this description is full-blown, providing an abundance of sights, sounds and smells. If Aschenbach lodges in the Lido, it's Venice that is beginning to rage with the cholera, and the author depicts Venice in all its grandeur – and decadence – together with the “noisome” suggestion of danger from this dreaded disease. Setting details, like

character details, must be purposeful. Without such concrete details of setting, Mann's novella would lack sufficient force. The cholera is taking place here, now, in *this* place. The vivid setting details become important in terms of providing much-needed context.

In *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), Ian McEwan, British author of over a dozen works of fiction, keeps the setting anonymous. Yet everything about this novella suggests Venice, and as the *New York Times Book Review* declared, it's “obviously Venice.” As in Mann's novella, Venice becomes the place of death. In this case, a young British couple, Colin and Mary, are experiencing a troubled relationship while on holiday. By chance, they meet a denizen of the city, Robert, a strange man, an aggressive man – a man on the scary side. They take up with Robert and his wife, Caroline, and in a short time span, Robert brutally murders Colin, slicing his wrist with a razor blade.

Why?

The answer is found in Caroline's bizarre linking of love with killing the very object of one's love. Interestingly, T. J. Reed, distinguished Mann critic, says of Aschenbach's “strange satisfaction” over the prospect that Tadzio would probably not live long: “There is an impulse to cherish, but also to destroy.” This uncanny connection between love and destruction is also to be found, but with a vengeance, in Robert's need to destroy Colin, whose beauty fascinates him. Aberrant psychology, this is, and very difficult to explain – yet McEwan leaves us with the conundrum. We permit it because McEwan's compelling characters make us willing to suspend disbelief. We also permit it because McEwan's novel is extraordinarily rich in setting, irresistibly drawing us in.

McEwan uses deft brush strokes to depict a *campo* at night.

In one direction the street vanished into total darkness; in the other, a diffused blue-gray light was making visible a series of low buildings which descended

Campanile
(bell tower) of
the Basilica di
San Marco



Mary Jane Smith

like blocks cut in granite and converged in the gloom where the street curved away. Thousands of feet above, an attenuated finger of cloud pointed across the line of the curve, and reddened. A cool, salty wind blew along the street and stirred a cellophane wrapper against the step on which Colin and Mary were sitting.

The couple is lost in the dark in this *campo* without a map. The prospect of being lost in Venice, particularly at night, undoubtedly resonates with many anxious travelers, for once one veers off the Grand Canal, Venice is rather like a maze, with narrow *calli* leading from one *campo* of tall buildings to another. No clear vistas here. Through concrete setting details, McEwan causes the reader to *experience*, right

along with Colin and Mary, the feeling of being lost. And on the figurative level, the sense of disorientation the two characters feel *sans* map to guide them suggests their troubled relationship – one with no clear direction in mind.

Notice how McEwan handles interior settings with equal adroitness. Mary makes her way through Robert's gallery in his palatial mansion.

She was picking her way through a long gallery of treasures, heirlooms, a family museum in which a minimum of living space had been improvised around the exhibits, all ponderously ornate, unused and lovingly cared-for items of dark mahogany, carved and polished, splay-footed, and cushioned in velvet. Two grandfather clocks stood in a recess on her left, like sentinels, and ticked against each other. Even the smaller objects, stuffed birds in glass domes, vases, fruit bowls, lamp stands, inexplicable brass and cut-glass objects, appeared too heavy to lift, pressed into place by the weight of time and lost histories.



WHAT DOES MARY SEE? Museum pieces of the finest quality, “ponderously ornate,” arranged to allow a minimum of living space, grandfather clocks, and a number of smaller collector's items – we can't help but appreciate the sheer volume of detail McEwan provides. The author places us *there*, with Mary, inside this imposing palace. The gallery setting, as seen here and developed

more fully later, serves a second function, establishing Robert as one who takes special pride in treasures handed down from his father and grandfather – his patrilineal heritage. Robert's a firm believer in patriarchy, in a particularly dangerous, brutal form of male dominance. When he guides Colin about the gallery, informing him about each valued piece, the visual setting details greatly enrich our sense of place, but they also shed light on Robert's character.

Christi Phillips' *The Rossetti Letter* (2007) also captures both external and internal spaces with stunning visual imagery. It's 1617, and the Spanish ambassador reflects on the Venetian setting.

From the pestilential marsh that surrounded it to the innumerable waterways that laced it together, the entire city was rank. Even within the grandest palazzi, he could smell the decay. It seeped up from the foundations into the stones and the mortar and the brick, into the filigreed plaster and the marble, into the mosaic tile and the ornate, gilded rooms. Not for the first time he wondered what had possessed men to build these opulent treasure chests on top of a swamp. Was it solely for the pleasure of their beauty?

This ambassador will play a key role in the Spanish conspiracy to overthrow the Republic of Venice and place the city under Spanish dominion. His description serves two novelistic purposes: to locate the reader visually in this Venetian setting and to establish the skeptical attitude of the Spanish ambassador. Here again, description of setting serves more than one purpose.

Note how concretely Phillips describes the interior of a palatial home. Alessandra, a 17th-century woman considering the life of a courtesan over her present, limited options – poverty or life in a nunnery – is fascinated by the grandeur and opulence of a successful courtesan's palace.

In the three weeks since she'd first come here, she hadn't quite overcome her astonishment at the luxuriousness of La Celestia's palazzo. Each day she found another detail at which to marvel: soaring ceilings painted with clouds and angels or scenes from mythology; endless mosaic tile floors, layered with sumptuous carpets; a *camera d'oro* – or chamber of gold, with walls coated in gold leaf – adjacent to the *portego* that glowed in the afternoons with a light so rich it appeared almost liquid. The walls were covered with tapestries, ornate mirrors, and portraits of La Celestia – Alessandra had counted eight so far. On the top floor was a lavish room just for bathing, containing a huge tub where the courtesan took her daily ablutions, in water steeped with fragrant herbs, or, twice a week, in milk.

It's important to Alessandra to have such a lavish existence as La Celestia, who has established herself in Venetian society exceedingly well, her palazzo displaying great material riches, comforts and pleasures. Precise setting details give us the experience of being inside this palace. Phillips *shows* instead of tells us.

Venice is a captivating city because of its sublime beauty, its faded glory from ages past and its deep mystery. The more open you are to Venice in its many expressions, the more you'll have a distinct feeling for this place, and that feeling will carry over into your setting as well as your characters. Find that almost indefinable something in this great city by experiencing as much as you can and storing it up – your photos, your journal, your memories – for the creative imagination to transform into an exceptional work of fiction. Study the masters to learn how to make the setting visual and how to use setting in multiple ways. How you handle Venice you can carry over to any city: Paris, London, New York. You must put your reader *there*, just as you were there. 

Jack Smith is the author of *Write and Revise for Publication*, numerous articles, interviews and reviews and two satirical novels, *Hog to Hog*, winner of the George Garrett Fiction Prize, and *Icon*. He is currently working on a novel set in Venice.

School supplies

Connect to young readers with dynamic classroom visits.

When Kelly Milner Halls arrived for a school visit, the librarian warned her about a quirky third grader who would be at every one of her six sessions that day. He had checked out only one book each week: Milner Halls' *Tales of the Cryptids: Mysterious Creatures That May or May Not Exist*.

"He sat with me at lunch and got suddenly quiet," says the author.

"Then he said, 'I never thought this day would come.' I asked, 'What day is that?' and he said, 'I never thought the day would come when I would meet someone like me.' Those are the days when you know you've got a good life."

School visits such as the dozens Milner Halls does allow authors who write for children to increase both readership and book sales. Best of all, writers have a chance to interact with – and learn from – their target audience. "My life is about curiosity," Millner Halls says, "and we get to celebrate that curiosity together."

Schools across the country pay for dynamic speakers to offer presentations to small and large groups. With thousands of authors eager to connect with their audiences, how can you ensure that your perfor-

mance stands out as more thrilling than the Kidizoom Smartwatch DX?

Preparation is key

Picture book author Kim Norman runs a blog called Cool School Visits. When she receives contact information for a school's event coordinator, she sends guides to her books with activities that teachers can do before or after her visit. She offers a poster that coordinators can download from

her site and bookmarks for distribution. She also provides a video compilation of book-cover images and pictures of her Newfoundland dog for organizers to run as students assemble for her presentation.

"In advance of my visits," she says, "I send coordinators a 'scavenger hunt' of my website for students to do before I come. It's a fun little quiz about images and factoids that they can find on my site."

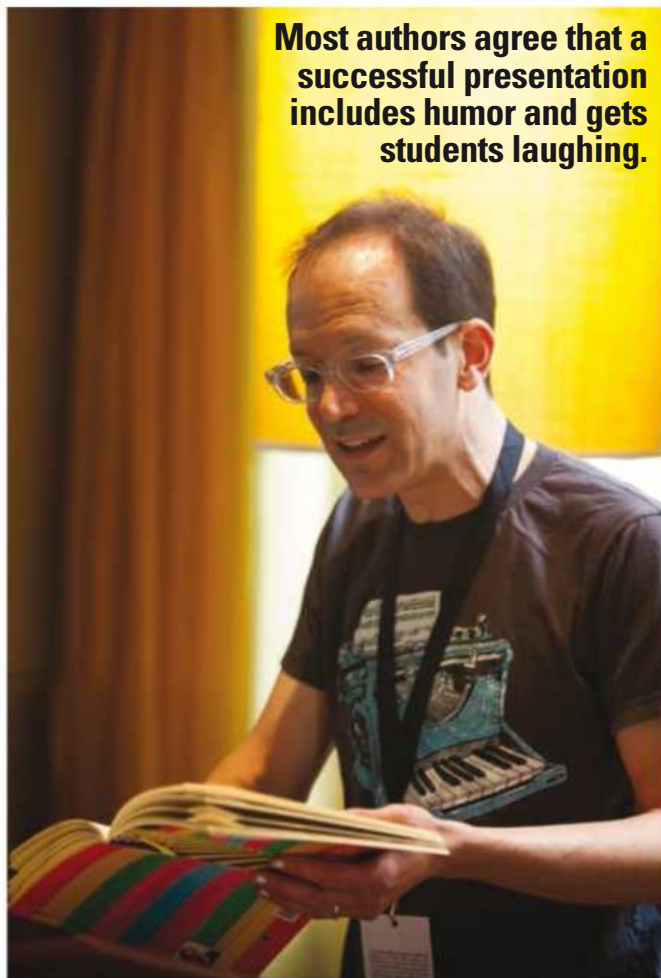
Young adult author

Maria E. Andreu notes that the more prepared the school is, the more successful the author's visit will be. Before one of her events, administrators got a grant to buy copies of her book *The Secret Side of Empty* for English classes. "They prepped students by having them write questions ahead of time, planned a breakfast and reception and involved their school media team in an on-camera interview with me," she says. "The kids were excited and engaged because they'd been so involved in the planning and execution of the event."

Rock it in real time

"Performing to a group of 300 students is like a Springsteen concert," says David Biedrzycki, author and illustrator of the *Ace Lacewing Bug Detective*

Most authors agree that a successful presentation includes humor and gets students laughing.



Expert tips on school visits

"Encourage teachers to read a chapter or two of one of your books aloud to the class. Share book trailers in advance. These fun, short videos are an easy way to hook the kids' interest in books and in the author."

—Julie Berry, *The Scandalous Sisterhood of Prickwillow Place*



"Discussion guides are great, especially if they're aligned to the Common Core."

—Maria E. Andreu, *The Secret Side of Empty*

"Preschoolers have very short attention spans, so my best word of advice is to gather in a classroom setting, rather than an assembly, and to keep your story sessions short – 20 minutes at the most."

—Laura Sassi, *Goodnight Manger* and *Goodnight Arc*

"Because many of my books have to do with sports, the school has the kids wear their favorite sports jersey on the day of my visit. It adds to the excitement and increases engagement from the students."

—Brad Herzog, *Count on Me Sports* series

series. "You've got to rock it. Do something that no one else does. Be educational without appearing to be."

Biedrzycki visits more than 60 schools a year and engages students with real-time creations of digital art on a laptop and graphic tablet. Milner Halls, whose topics are far-ranging, shows a PowerPoint presentation as she talks. She brings fossils and artifacts for students to touch. "I engage at least three of their senses, connecting with kids who learn in different ways," she says.

Most authors agree that a successful presentation includes humor and gets students laughing. Some show funny pictures of their dogs. Others show funny photos of themselves as children.

"Humor is the great icebreaker," Biedrzycki says. "It gets kids on your side." 

Melissa Hart is a nonfiction instructor in the Whidbey Island M.F.A. Program. She's the author of *Wild Within: How Rescuing Owls Inspired a Family* and *Avenging the Owl*.

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A class of its own

Think pursuing an MFA for your chapter book is overkill? Think again.

When it comes to earning an MFA, you may think it's for fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry. But those writing children's and young adult literature have options, too. And if you think that higher education isn't necessary to write for young readers, think again.

"Writing for children and adolescents isn't a simpler version of writing for adults," says Amanda Cockrell, director of graduate programs in children's literature at Hollins University. "It's a whole different art, just as demanding, and maybe even more complicated."

Vermont College of Fine Arts launched the first writing-for-young-readers MFA in 1997. It has since morphed into a two-year low-residency program, a format many children and young adults MFA courses follow. Uma Krishnaswami, a faculty member in the VCFA program, says, "The low-residency structure in particular offers writers the perfect blend of solitude and community."

In Vermont's case, students gather at the Montpelier campus for 10-day residencies that include workshops, panels and lectures. Off-campus, students spend the semester focusing on a certain aspect of children's writing – from picture books to middle grade. Award-winning faculty members are paired with each participant for one-on-one mentoring to cover a self-designed syllabus of critical reading and writing across the field, including nonfiction and poetry.



"Over the years," Krishnaswami says, "I've seen the MFA program in Writing for Children and Young Adults at VCFA serve as a kind of hothouse, giving writers the tools, the confidence, the insights they need to realize their potential."

In fact, that is what the Hamline University MFAC program offered Orrin Hanratty. The 2015 graduate says, "Everything at Hamline is built to help you become a better writer and storyteller."

But even bigger than that, Hanratty says the community he found among his peers and the contacts he made with both students and faculty have sustained him after graduation. "At residency, my classmates and I would sit up late into the night talking about children's books and story craft," he says of the two in-person sessions per year in St. Paul. "I send work to the friends I made, secure that they are knowledgeable readers and intelligent writers who can see something I missed and tell me how to fix it."

The creative writing program at Lesley University puts a unique publishing twist on its syllabus. After teaming up with Candlewick Press last year, students now have the option of putting their picture book, middle-grade or young adult manuscript on the desk of an editor for publication consideration.

"Most houses these days don't consider unsolicited manuscripts," says David Elliott, genre chair of Writing for Young People at Lesley, "so this partnership gives our students an opportunity that is not

otherwise immediately available. After two years of hard work, they're guaranteed an unbiased response from a successful editor at a major house."

In addition to that exclusive arrangement, Lesley brings in a stream of visiting writers, including Lois Lowry and the late Maurice Sendak.

Author connections are certainly a factor to consider when weighing programs. For example, the four graduate programs at Simmons College are offered in collaboration with The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. Founded in part by the author of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, it is the first museum in the U.S. devoted to picture book art from around the world – and it also where the residencies for the program are held.

Hanratty enjoyed having lunch with faculty advisors, some of whom he says were "famous enough to be Jeopardy answers." He continues, "When they give lectures on how they wrote something from one of your favorite books,

it's like peeking behind the curtain at the Wizard of Oz."

The Spalding University program pays attention both to craft and audience considerations, drawing visiting writers such as Jacqueline Woodson, Daniel Handler and Naomi Shihab Nye. In addition to picture books and middle-grade fiction, the faculty have also written historical nonfiction, poetry and children's theater.

Faculty and coursework are really the heart of these MFA programs. Cockrell explains: "In an MFA program specifically for writers of works for children and teens, you'll find courses geared to helping you find that child's voice, that adolescent's memories, that you carry in yourself, and use them to build your craft and your voice as a writer."

At Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia, students can earn MA and MFA degrees over the span of three to five summer sessions – with options to include illustration. But for writers who aren't ready to make the leap into a full-blown graduate degree, Hollins offers non-degree options, in addition to the annual Francelia Butler Conference, a one-day student-run event devoted to children's literature. Meanwhile, alumnus Margaret Wise Brown, author of *Goodnight Moon* and *The Runaway Bunny*, is honored every year with a prize awarded in her name.

If you're undecided about whether the investment of time and money will be worthwhile, consider Krishnaswami, who says, "I wish I'd had the opportunity to enroll in an MFA program years ago when I was just starting out as a writer interested in writing for young readers. I think it might have saved me several years of floundering around trying to find the resources I needed. Now as a teacher, I feel energized and enriched by my students' journeys." 

Meredith Quinn is a graduate of New York University and managing editor at *The Writer*.



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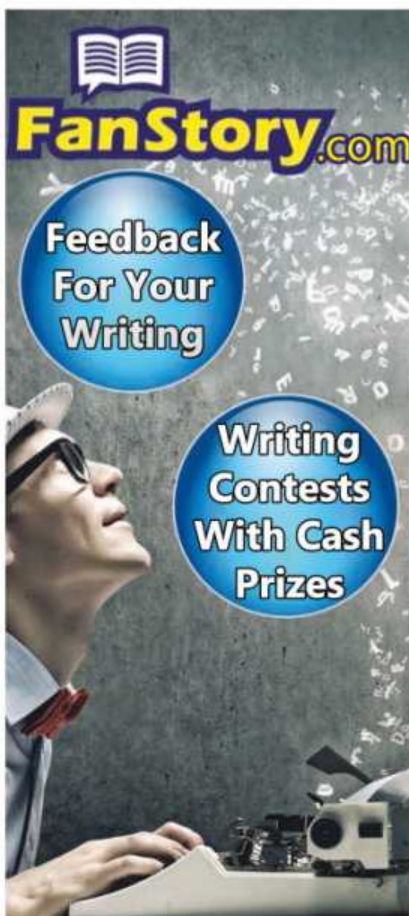
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- Judge: Nuala O'Connor
- Closes: 28 Feb '16
- Word Limit: 300
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Read, write, draw

Children's book writers and illustrators take over Midtown.

A writing conference bustling with the biggest names in the children's book world and more than 1,000 attendees from 17 countries and nearly every U.S. state – sounds like fun, right? By all accounts, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' annual Winter Conference in New York City is just that.

"The conference is a mix of social networking and fact-filled sessions aimed at dispensing practical information to help attendees hone their creative skills and to then market their work," says Stephen Mooser, president of the SCBWI.

As with many niches, the children's book world is a close one, and the SCBWI Winter Conference almost serves as a who's who. When it comes to attendees, Mooser says, "Most people are enthusiastic about hearing from the stars of children's book publishing."

This year, those stars include keynote speakers: authors Gary Schmidt and Rita Garcia-Williams, Merit Press editor-in-chief Jacqueline Mitchard and illustrator William Joyce, whose speech will kick off the festivities. Later in the day, *Eleanor & Park* author Rainbow Rowell will sit down with *Hank Zipzer* co-author and executive director of SCBWI Lin Oliver for an in-depth interview, which will be followed by an autograph session.

The two-day February conference is attended by published authors and



illustrators, as well as up-and-coming and aspiring writers. All can benefit from the breakout sessions, most of which are led by agents, editors and other industry insiders. In fact, according to Mooser, they are one of the biggest draws for attending. "This conference, because it is in New York where most children's book publishers

are located, lets attendees hear directly from the buyers of their work what they are looking for," he says. "Additionally, many publishers who normally won't accept unsolicited manuscripts make an exception for conference attendees."

Panels this year take place mostly on Saturday, February 13, and include topics such as writing picture book text, building a portfolio, memorable middle grade fiction, query letters, diversity, graphic novels, plotting a novel and writing series fiction. For the first time, attendees can participate in the PAL forum, a new feature for 2016, during which SCBWI members who have been traditionally published can discuss issues such as career longevity and supplementing income.

A bonus day of programming occurs the day before the conference

CONFERENCE SCBWI Winter Conference

DATES
February 12-14

LOCATION
Hyatt Grand
Central,
New York City

WEBSITE
scbwi.org

officially starts, and participation comes at an additional fee. On Friday, February 12, two full-day intensives are planned: novel revision with Kate Messner and Linda Urban, and a panel on build-

ing and sustaining an illustration career. Attendees of these sessions may also register for a small-group critique at the Writers' Roundtable. "Those who participate in the intensives [can] refine their works in progress generally under the eye and advice of an editor or agent," says Mooser.

Some of the most interesting and well-attended events of the SCBWI Winter Conference occur after panel hours. Participants enjoy the social events, particularly as they allow for networking with peers. Many industry insiders and attendees alike stop by the Art Browse event, where the portfolios of the nearly 400 illustrators in attendance are put on display. This is a unique opportunity for illustrators to catch the eye of editors and publishers, as well as make contacts with writers in search of someone to transform their words into pictures. Other social events include an onsite gala dinner, multiple themed mixers and an autograph party with writers and illustrators to wrap up the entire weekend.

With the final day of the SCBWI Winter Conference falling on Valentine's Day this year, here's hoping luck will be on your side, and an editor will fall in love with your children's book. 

Meredith Quinn is a graduate of New York University and managing editor at *The Writer*.



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For girls, by girls

Adults can publish too, but girls 8 and up get preference.

Download a sample issue of *New Moon Girls* on the magazine's website, and you'll find page after page of fun graphics and lively articles that run the gamut from how to succeed in school to the changes boys undergo during puberty. One page asks readers to describe their lives in six words. "Being weird with confidence is valuable," writes Eleanor, 13. Another section examines differences, labels and stereotypes with readers' personal insights into dealing with issues such as Asperger's and scoliosis.

Nancy Gruver launched *New Moon* with her twin daughters, then pre-teens, in 1992. "When we started, adults were concerned about girls' issues, but they were talking among themselves about what the problems were and what to do about them," she says. "We brought girls' voices into that conversation, saying that they had the ability to talk

about their own needs and the needs of other girls, and how our culture and society could do a better job at addressing these."

Since then, the magazine has expanded to include an e-version, a blog and other offerings that allow for community-building worldwide. "We've just launched an online creative community for girls," Gruver says. "They share writing and artwork with each other." This year, the organization also piloted an online writing workshop for girls ages 10 to 12, led by children's author Mary Losure.

Tone, editorial content

Twenty-three years into publishing, Gruver is still excited to feature pieces that "reflect girls in the complexity of who they are; they aren't reduced to stereotypes of tweens who are silly, mean and obsessed with shopping and dating." In the September/October 2015

issue, articles included how to hold a fashion show, how to cope with your period and one member's story of how she built and launched her first rocket.

Both girls and adults are welcome to submit pieces, which are then evaluated by *New Moon's* editorial board, made up of girls ages 8 to 11. The tone of a typical story is respectful, curious, empowering. In a recent issue, 14-year-old Nik Harang wrote "Get a Handle on Homework." "Make flash cards," she suggests. "It's a really helpful way to study. If you don't have a buddy to quiz you, use them to quiz yourself.... Just the act of making the flashcards helps cement the information in your brain."

Another 14-year-old, Mariama Marrah, writes about her experiences in Koidu Town, Sierra Leone, in West Africa. "I live with my grandmother," Marrah writes. "There are a lot of people in my family. There's my grandmother, grandfather, my grandmother's mate (the second wife of my grandfather), uncles, aunties and little children. My grandparents are farmers, and they sometimes grow vegetables such as corn, cassava and yams."

Contributors

The September/October 2015 issue includes 11-year-old Liberty Proctor's story, "Freedom Flies." "A stupendous writer," editors note of Proctor on Facebook. Writer and illustrator Claire Baldwin grew up reading *New Moon*; an adult now, she created illustrations for the story, including one of a winged girl, arms joyfully upraised, contemplating a brain in a glass jar.

New Moon's executive editor is Helen Cortes, who works to include as many

"We show girls as powerful, active, interesting makers in charge of their lives – not as passive beings who are acted upon or watching others."

Bimonthly print, e-magazine, online subscriptions

\$25.99 to \$40.95

Reading Period: Year-round

Genres: All

Length: Up to 600 words

Submission format: Digital submission on website

Contact: Helen Cordes, editor, *New Moon Girls*.

Contact via website
newmoon.com



Shutterstock/Tsha

girls' voices as possible in each magazine. The September/October 2015 issue, with its theme of "Everything Bestie: Favorites," includes girls' views on best bedtime rules, the best advice you've ever gotten from a friend and descriptions of your favorite clothes, "the ones you feel really comfortable in," explains Gruver, "and why."

Adult contributions run to profiles of notable women and girls and to short pieces for the magazine's departments. "We have a department called 'Women's Work' about a woman and her work," Gruver says, "and we have a science and technology section, and a department called 'Body Language,' which is all about your body and its changes, ranging from puberty to emotions to how your brain works."

Advice for potential contributors

New Moon publishes guidelines for girl contributors on its website. Editors encourage the submission of "ideas, articles, inventions, fiction, gardens, poetry, music, op-eds, apps, global villages, recipes, plays, buildings, puzzles, projects, jokes, speeches, games, screenplays, sports, art, experiments,

costumes, activism, photos, rockets, crafts, designs, gadgets, dances, solutions, hats and everything else you imagine and make."

Within separate contributor guidelines for adults, writers will find this caveat:

"*New Moon* is a magazine for girls and by girls. An article written by a girl will always take precedence over an adult-written article of a similar nature." 

Melissa Hart is a nonfiction instructor in the Whidbey Island MFA. Program. She's the author of *Wild Within: How Rescuing Owls Inspired a Family* and *Avenging the Owl*.

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INFORMATION in this section is provided to *The Writer* by the individual markets and events; for more information, contact those entities directly.

Workshoppy

Writing conferences are packed with panel discussions, keynote speeches and workshops to help hone your writing. Here are some tips for making the most out of conference craft sessions.

» CONFERENCES

ALASKA

KACHEMAK BAY WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Homer, Alaska, June 10-14. Offers daily workshops, readings and panel presentations in fiction, poetry, nonfiction and the business of writing. Manuscript reviews and academic credit also available. Keynote speaker Natasha Trethewey. **Contact:** Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference, Kenai Peninsula College/UAA, 533 E. Pioneer Ave., Homer, AK 99603. 907-235-7743. iyconf@kpc.alaska.edu writersconference.homer.alaska.edu

ARIZONA

DESERT NIGHTS, RISING STARS

Tempe, Arizona Feb. 18-20. Hosted by the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University. Schedule includes craft classes, conversations, panels and readings, as well as opportunities to network with writers. Faculty includes Jewell Parker Rhodes, Manuel Muñoz and Lee Gutkind. **Contact:** Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, P.O. Box 875002, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287. 480-965-6018. pipercenter.info@asu.edu piper.asu.edu/conference

CALIFORNIA

SAN FRANCISCO WRITERS CONFERENCE

San Francisco, California, February 11-14. Top authors, agents and editors meet to discuss fiction, nonfiction, poetry and specialty writing such as children's books and travel writing. Other topics include marketing, self-publishing, Internet possibilities and trends. Also offers "speed dating with agents." Presenters include: Annie Barrows, Jane

- 1 Do your research.** Before you sign up for a conference, explore the faculty lineup and daily schedule to see what sessions will be beneficial to your work. Note the workshops you'd like to attend and find out what the protocol is for registering. And do so by the cutoff date.
- 2 Be prepared.** If you are asked to bring a piece to workshop, make sure you have it. Likewise, pack all of the items you'll need – notepad, pens, your tablet, a voice recorder – to ensure you and your work will continue to benefit from the workshop once you're back at home.
- 3 Keep an open mind.** Whether commenting on someone else's work or hearing feedback on your own, be open to new ideas and ways of thinking. One person's method (including your own) is not the law of the land, and you can learn a lot from simply interacting with other writers.

The following conferences are a small sampling of what the industry has to offer. Find more listings at writermag.com.

Friedman, Ann Packer, Kristyn Keene and Katharine Sands. **Contact:** San Francisco Writers Conference, 1029 Jones St., San Francisco, CA 94109. 415-673-0939. sfwriterscon@aol.com sfwriters.org

SANTA BARBARA WRITERS CONFERENCE

Santa Barbara, California, June 5-10. Writers in all genres from various countries gather in Santa Barbara to spend a week focused on story, voice, craft, marketing and networking with fellow writers and publishing professionals. Has hosted legendary writers such as Ray Bradbury, William Styron, Eudora Welty, James Michener and T.C. Boyle. **Contact:** Santa Barbara Writers Conference, 27 W. Anapamu St., Suite 305, Santa Barbara, CA 93101. 805-568-1516. info@sbwriters.com sbwriters.com

COLORADO

ASPEN SUMMER WORDS

Aspen, Colorado, June 19-24. One part literary festival, one part writing retreat, the Aspen Summer words event is hosted by some of the nation's most gifted and engaging writers. Brings writers and readers together for author readings and talks, interviews and Q&As, writing workshops and literature appreciation classes. Consultations also available. **Contact:** Aspen Writers' Foundation, 110 E. Hallam St., Suite 116, Aspen, CO 81611. 970-925-3122. aspenwords@aspeninstitute.org aspenwriters.org

NORTHERN COLORADO WRITERS CONFERENCE

Fort Collins, Colorado, April 22-23. Categories of focus include children's, fiction, general, journalism, marketing, mystery, nonfiction, poetry, romance or science fiction. The conference brings in editors, agents and presenters from all over the country and offers more than 25 workshop choices.

Registration is limited to 130 writers. **Contact:** Kerrie Flanagan, Director, Northern Colorado Writers, 2107 Thunderstone Court, Fort Collins, CO 80525. 970-556-0908. Email from website. northerncoloradowritersconference.com

PIKES PEAK WRITERS CONFERENCE

Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 15-17. The 24th annual conference held by the Pikes Peak Writers features informative workshops, motivational speeches, networking opportunities, read and critique sessions and the chance to pitch your manuscript to industry editors and agents. Keynote speakers: Rachel Caine, Joe R. Lansdale, Jeff Lindsay and Wendy Corsi Staub. **Contact:** Pikes Peak Writers, P.O. Box 64273, Colorado Springs, CO 80962. 719-244-6220. pikespeakwriters.com

CONNECTICUT

WESLEYAN WRITERS CONFERENCE

Middletown, Conn., June 2016. Welcomes new and established writers. Includes seminars, workshops, readings, panel discussions and manuscript consultations. Many genres addressed and scholarships available. Register early to enter a manuscript for faulty consultation. **Contact:** Anne Greene, Director, Wesleyan Writers Conference, Wesleyan University, 294 High St., Room 207, Middletown, CT 06459. 860-685-3604. agreene@wesleyan.edu wesleyan.edu/writing/conference

YALE WRITERS' CONFERENCE

New Haven, Conn., two sessions in June 2016. Workshops, individual conferences, master classes, discussions and presentations. Second session delves deeper into specific genres, including crime fiction, writing for children, historical fiction, humor, biography, memoir, playwriting, poetry, science fiction, fantasy, screenwriting and travel. Conference limited to 130 attendees. **Contact:** Yale Writers' Conference, ywc@yale.edu summer.yale.edu/ywc

FLORIDA

BLUE FLOWER ARTS WINTER WRITERS' CONFERENCE

New Smyrna Beach, Florida, March 13-18. Provides workshops, readings and panels in a community setting. Includes meals and one-on-one time with the master writers and other participants. Workshops in fiction, poetry and memoir led by top-selling writers in each genre. Limited to 13

writers for each of the three genres. **Contact:** BFA WWC c/o Atlantic Center for the Arts, 1414 Art Center Ave., New Smyrna Beach, FL 32168. 386-427-6975. alison@blueflowerarts.com blueflowerarts.com/wwc

PALM BEACH POETRY FESTIVAL

Delray Beach, Florida, Jan. 18-23, 2016. Features reading events, craft lectures and poetry workshops with poets from throughout America. Workshops are limited to 12 participants. Speakers include Tom Sleigh, Carol Frost, Thomas Lux and Carl Dennis. **Contact:** Palm Beach Poetry Festival, 3199 B-3 Lake Worth Road, Lake Worth, FL 33461. 561-868-2063. news@palmbeachpoetryfestival.org palmbeachpoetryfestival.org

SLEUTHFEST 2016

Deerfield Beach, Florida, Feb. 25-28. Offers panels on the craft and business of mystery writing as well as agent or editor appointments. Keynote speaker C.J. Box, plus P.J. Parrish and Valerie Plame. **Contact:** sleuthfestinfo@gmail.com sleuthfest.com

GEORGIA

BLUE RIDGE WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Blue Ridge, Ga., April 8-9. This conference seeks to educate and inspire writers with feedback from writers, editors and agents. Includes workshops on a wide range of topics. **Contact:** Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association, 420 W. Main St., Blue Ridge, GA 30513. 706-632-2144. blueridgearts@gmail.com blueridgewritersconference.com

SAVANNAH BOOK FESTIVAL

Savannah, Georgia, Feb. 11-14. Free and open to the public with readings and presentations from authors around the country. Past authors included Alice Hoffman, Stephen King and Sandra Brown. This year's keynote is Erik Larson. **Contact:** Savannah Book Festival, One Diamond Causeway, Suite 21-331, Savannah, GA 31406. 912-598-4040. info@savannahbookfestival.org savannahbookfestival.org

IOWA

IOWA SUMMER WRITING FESTIVAL

Iowa City, Iowa, June -July. Offers a wide selection

of weekend and weeklong workshops throughout the summer. Choose from fiction, poetry, nonfiction, writing for children, play/screenwriting, fantasy/science fiction and "genre-benders." **Contact:** Iowa Summer Writing Festival, The University of Iowa, 250 Continuing Education Facility, Iowa City, IA 52242. 319-335-4160. iswfestival@uiowa.edu iowasummerwritingfestival.org

LOUISIANA

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS NEW ORLEANS LITERARY FESTIVAL

New Orleans, Louisiana, March 30-April 3. Created to honor the legacy of Tennessee Williams and support and nurture writers, actors, musicians and other artists. **Contact:** Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival, 938 Lafayette St., Suite 514, New Orleans, LA 70113. 800-990-3378. info@tennesseewilliams.net tennesseewilliams.net

MAINE

STONECOAST WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Freeport, Maine, Summer 2016. Students work closely with the distinguished faculty composed of award-winning writers. Workshops are available in poetry, short fiction, novel and nonfiction/memoir, or a mixed genre boot camp. **Contact:** Justin Tusling, Director, Stonecoast Writers' Conference, c/o Dept. of English, University of Southern Maine, P.O. Box 9300, Portland, ME 04104. 207-228-8393. usm.maine.edu/summer/stonecoast-writers-conference

MICHIGAN

BEAR RIVER WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Ann Arbor, Michigan, June 2-6. Workshops in poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction, as well as readings, discussions, nature walks and time for writing. Staffed by the University of Michigan English department. **Contact:** Bear River Writers' Conference, Dept. of English Language and Literature, 3187 Angell Hall, University of Michigan, 435 South State St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109. 734-936-2271. bearriver@umich.edu lsa.umich.edu/bearriver

RALLY OF WRITERS

Lansing, Michigan, April 9. An annual one-day conference, featuring a keynoter and 16 breakout sessions led by published Michigan authors in sev-

eral genres of writing, including novels, short stories, articles, poetry and children's writing.

Contact: arallyofwriters@att.net
arallyofwriters.com

MISSOURI

NEW LETTERS WEEKEND WRITERS CONFERENCE

Kansas City, Missouri, June 24-26. A weekend of writing, including workshops in various genres and coaching by professional writers. Keynote address given by an award-winning author. **Contact:** New Letters, UMKC, University House, 5101 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110. 816-235-1168. newletters@umkc.edu newletters.org

NEVADA

LAS VEGAS WRITERS CONFERENCE

Las Vegas, Nevada, April 28-30. Consists of a small group of writers attending pitch sessions, talks with faculty, workshops, seminars and expert panels, as well as plenty of opportunities to meet and network with other writers, editors and agents. **Contact:** Henderson Writers Group, PO Box 92032, Henderson, NV 89009. 702-953-5675. info@lasvegaswritersconference.com lasvegaswritersconference.com

NEW HAMPSHIRE

FROST PLACE CONFERENCE ON POETRY AND TEACHING

Franconia, N.H., June 25-29. Brings together hard-working classroom teachers and highly skilled poets to share their experiences of how poetry is most effectively presented in the classroom. Graduate-level and continuing education credits are available through Plymouth State University. **Contact:** The Frost Place, P.O. Box 74, Franconia, NH 03580. 603-823-5510. frost@frostplace.org frostplace.org

NEW JERSEY

WINTER POETRY & PROSE GETAWAY

Galloway, New Jersey, Jan. 15-18, 2016. Offers challenging and supportive workshops that focus on starting new material with feedback from award-winning faculty. Choose from novel, children's, creative nonfiction, memoir, songwriting, screenwriting or poetry. **Contact:** Winter Poetry & Prose Getaway, Murphy Writing of Stockton University, 35 S. Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd.,

Atlantic City, NJ 08401. 609-626-3594.
info@wintergetaway.com wintergetaway.com

NEW YORK

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF JOURNALISTS AND AUTHORS (ASJA) ANNUAL CONFERENCE

New York, New York, May 20-21. The ASJA annual conference focuses on independent writing and will help you succeed in a freelancing career. Learn how to market yourself to editors and agents and network with fellow writers and publishing professionals. Features over 50 sessions. Full schedule on website. **Contact:** ASJA, 355 Lexington Avenue, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10017. 212-997-0947. Email from website. asja.org

COLGATE WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Hamilton, New York, June 12-18. Readings, workshops, craft talks and free time to write and explore the area. Hosted on the Colgate University Campus. Highlights fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and short story writing. Bring a work in progress. **Contact:** Matthew Leone, Director, Colgate Writers' Conference, Office of Summer Programs, 13 Oak Drive, Hamilton, NY 13346. 315-228-7771. writersconference@colgate.edu cwc.colgate.edu

THE WRITER'S HOTEL MASTER CLASS IN FICTION, NONFICTION & POETRY

New York, June 1-7. Three classic Manhattan writers' hotels host panels, lectures, workshops and agent speed dating. Editors read participant work beforehand. Faculty includes Dolen Perkins-Valdez, Scott Wolven, Shanna McNair, Paige Williams, Roger Bonair-Agard, Carey Salerno and Kevin Larimer. Writers can read their work at iconic literary venues. **Contact:** The New Guard & The Writer's Hotel, P.O. Box 5101, Hanover, NH 03755. editors@writershotel.com writershotel.com

NORTH CAROLINA

BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS CHRISTIAN WRITERS CONFERENCE

Ridgecrest, North Carolina, May 22-26. One of the largest Christian writing conferences in the country, the conference draws writers from across the nation and covers topics such as novel writing, nonfiction, screenplays, visual media, devotions, freelance, children's, magazine articles and web

content. **Contact:** Blue Ridge Mountains Christian Writers Conference. 800-588-7222.
altongansky.typepad.com/writersconferences

OHIO

KENYON REVIEW WRITERS WORKSHOP

Gambler, Ohio, June 18-July 3. Workshops are held for three hours every morning, while the afternoons are kept free for writing and reading. Evenings include public readings from instructors, visiting writers and workshop participants. Choose from novel, poetry, literary nonfiction, fiction, writing online or literary hybrid/book arts workshops. **Contact:** The Kenyon Review, Finn House, 102 W. Wiggan St., Kenyon College, Gambler, OH 43022. 740-427-5208. kenyonreview@kenyon.edu kenyonreview.org

OREGON

SUNRIVER WRITERS' SUMMIT

Sunriver, Oregon, May 2016. Offers three 12-hour workshop tracks from which to choose: Indie Excellence with Laura Taylor, Shaping Narrative with Judy Reeves or Writing Your Life Story with Jennifer Silva Redmond. The beautiful Sunriver Resort Lodge makes for a relaxing, inspirational setting. **Contact:** Michael Steven Gregory, Executive Director. SCWC/Summit, 18160 Cottonwood Rd. #260, Sunriver, OR 97707. 619-303-8185. msg@writersconference.com writersconference.com

LEFT COAST CRIME

Phoenix, Arizona, Feb. 25-28, 2016. An annual event sponsored by mystery fans where readers, writers, librarians and other mystery and thriller enthusiasts gather to share their mutual interest in the genre. Guests of Honor: Gregg Hurwitz and Ann Cleeves. **Contact:** Left Coast Crime. Ingrid Willis, Chair. ingrid@lcc2016.com leftcoastcrime2016.com

PENNSYLVANIA

PENNWRITERS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Lancaster, Pennsylvania, May 20-22. The 2016 keynoters are Jonathan Maberry and Kathryn Craft. The conference offers over 50 workshops, pitch sessions and genre breakout sessions. **Contact:** Pennwriters, Inc., 5706 Sonoma Ridge Missouri City, TX 77459. info@Pennwriters.org pennwriters.org

» YOUNG WRITERS

Writing contests are a great way to practice writing and hone your craft – at any age. Here is a roundup of 10 writing contests for young people. Share it with your favorite youthful writer.

F = Fiction **N** = Nonfiction
P = Poetry **D** = Drama
S = Screenplay

P F THE CLAREMONT REVIEW ANNUAL WRITING CONTEST

Enter up to three poems, three 500-word stories or one 5,000-word (max) story. Submit via regular mail. **Ages:** 13-19 years old. **Deadline:** See website. **Entry fee:** \$20 CAD (\$25 CAD for poetry and fiction combination). **Prizes:** In each category: 1st prize: \$500 CAD; 2nd prize: \$300 CAD; 3rd prize: \$200 CAD and publication. All entrants receive a 1-year subscription to *The Claremont Review*. **Contact:** Annual Writing Contest, the Claremont Review, Suite 101, 1581-H Hillside Ave., Victoria, B.C. V8T 2C1, Canada. Email through website. theclaremontreview.ca

F N P D S DAVIDSON FELLOWS AWARDS

Submit a 60-to-75 page portfolio containing three of the following genres: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama/screenplay. **Ages:** 18 or younger as of Oct. 1, 2016. **Deadline:** February 10, 2016. **Entry fee:** None. **Prizes:** \$10,000, \$25,000 or \$50,000 scholarship. **Contact:** Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 9665 Gateway Drive, Suite B, Reno, NV 89521. 775-852-3483 ext. 435.

davidsonfellows@davidsongifted.org
davidsongifted.org/fellows

F FOR TEENS BY TEENS AWARD

This prize goes to the best student-created story, which will be featured in the “for teens, by teens” section of the Story Share library. **Ages:** Teenagers. **Deadline:** December 31. **Entry fee:** See website. **Prizes:** \$200. **Contact:** Story Shares, 2450 17th Ave #225, Santa Cruz, CA 95062. info@storyshares.org
storyshares.org/our-contest

D S INTERNATIONAL THESPIAN FESTIVAL

Submit an original play on any subject that runs under 30 minutes. No collaborative works, adaptations or musicals. **Ages:** High school. **Deadline:** January 22, 2016. **Prizes:** Up to four plays will be chosen for play development workshops during the festival, culminating in a reading in front of an audience with talk-back. **Contact:** EdTA, 2343 Auburn Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45219. 513-421-3900. Email through website. schooltheatre.org/thespianfestival2016/home

P MANNINGHAM TRUST STUDENT POETRY CONTEST

States may submit 10 top poems in each division; individual students may also enter. **Ages:** Grades 6-12. **Deadline:** March 1, 2016. **Entry fee:** None. **Prizes:** 1st place: \$75, 2nd place: \$50, 3rd place: \$40, 4th place: \$35, 5th place: \$30; 5 honorable mentions: \$10 each. All winning poems will be published in the *Manningham Trust Poetry*

Student Award Anthology.

Contact: Send state collections to: Budd Mahan, 7059 Spring Valley Road, Dallas, TX 75254. 972-788-4944. buddmahan@att.net Send individual student entries to: Steve Concert, 49 Kitchen Ave., Harveys Lake, PA 18618. nfsp.com/student_awards.htm

N P THE NORMAN MAILER STUDENT AND TEACHER WRITING AWARDS

Open to high school and college students. Submit creative nonfiction or poetry up to 15 pages, depending on age group. **Ages:** High school and college. **Deadline:** Check website. **Prizes:** \$2,500 or \$5,000, depending on category. **Contact:** National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. 877-369-6283. nmw@ncte.org
ncte.org/awards/nmwa

F N P D SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

Presented by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. Submit in 11 writing categories: critical essay, dramatic script, flash fiction, humor, journalism, novel writing, personal essay/memoir, poetry, science fiction and fantasy, short story and writing portfolio (seniors only). **Ages:** Grades 7-12. **Deadline:** Dependent upon region. Check website. **Entry fee:** \$5-\$20, which can be waived under certain terms. **Prizes:** Scholarships and prizes up to \$10,000. **Contact:** Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012. info@artandwriting.org
artandwriting.org/the-awards

F N P S SKIPPING STONES YOUTH HONOR AWARDS

Recognizes works that promote multicultural, international and nature awareness. Prose under 1,000 words; poems under 30 lines. Non-English and bilingual writings welcome. **Ages:** 7-17 years old. **Deadline:** See website. **Entry fee:** \$5, which can be waived under certain terms. **Prizes:** 10 winners will receive a certificate, a subscription to *Skipping Stones* and five nature and/or multicultural books. **Contact:** Skipping Stones Magazine, P.O. Box 3939, Eugene, OR 97403. 541-342-4956. Info@skippingstones.org
skippingstones.org/youthhonor-02.htm

D S YOUNG PLAY-WRIGHTS, INC.

Founded by Stephen Sondheim, hosts under 21 and all-ages play contests. **Ages:** All ages. **Deadline:** See website. **Entry fee:** None. **Prizes:** Varies. **Contact:** Young Playwrights Inc., P.O. Box 5134, New York, NY 10185. info@youngplaywrights.org
youngplaywrights.org/for-writers

F N P S YOUNGARTS PROGRAM

Applications accepted in creative nonfiction, novel writing, play or scriptwriting, poetry, short story and spoken word. **Ages:** 15-18 years old. **Deadline:** Check website. **Entry fee:** \$35, which can be waived under certain terms. **Prizes:** Cash up to \$10,000. **Contact:** National YoungArts Foundation, 2100 Biscayne Boulevard, Miami, FL 33137. 1-888-725-2122. Email through website. youngarts.org

PHILADELPHIA WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 10-12. In its 68th year, the Philadelphia Writers' Conference is the oldest writing conference in the country with open registration. Optional master classes available in addition to workshops, peer critiques and pitch sessions. **Contact:** Philadelphia Writers' Conference, P.O. Box 7171 Elkins Park, PA 19027. info@pwcwriters.org pwcwriters.org

THE WRITE STUFF CONFERENCE

Allentown, Pennsylvania, April 7-9. The Greater Lehigh Valley Writers Group sponsors interactive sessions with industry leading authors, editors and agents. Page Cuts critique available with early registration, plus agent/editor pitch sessions and flash fiction writing contests. **Contact:** GLVWG, 1700 Sullivan Trail, PMB#138, Easton, PA 18040. glvwg.president@gmail.com greaterlehighvalleywritersgroup.wildapricot.org

TEXAS

WEST TEXAS WRITERS' ACADEMY

Canyon, Texas, June 6-10. This conference focuses on both traditional and self-publishing and takes a non-traditional approach. Unique workshops like firearms training for crime writers to plotting a novel within a week. Class sizes under 10 participants and in-class manuscript workshoping. **Contact:** Andrea Porter, Director, Education on Demand. West Texas A&M University, WTAMU Box 60185, Canyon, TX, 79016. 806-651-2037. aporter@wtamu.edu wtamu.edu

VIRGINIA

VIRGINIA FESTIVAL OF THE BOOK

Charlottesville, Virginia, March 16-20. Festival of literary events honoring book culture and promoting reading and literacy. Mostly free and open to the public. Presenters include Sara Gruen, Alan Furst, Douglas Brinkley and Tom Gjelten **Contact:** Virginia Festival of the Book, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 145 Ednam Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22903. 434-924-3296. vabook@virginia.edu vabook.org

WASHINGTON

TUPELO WRITING CONFERENCE AT WHIDBEY ISLAND

Washington, Jan. 30-31. An intimate confer-

ence in the Pacific Northwest, bringing poets together for an intense weekend of workshoping. **Contact:** Tupelo Press, PO Box 1767, North Adams, MA 01247. 413-664-961. Email through website. tupelopress.wordpress.com

NORTHWEST CHRISTIAN WRITERS RENEWAL

May 13-14. Dennis "Doc" Hensley shares his knowledge and experience of decades of writing more than 3,500 articles in major publications. **Contact:** renewal@nwchristianwriters.org nwchristianwriters.org/Renewal

WISCONSIN

NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS BOOKCAMP

West Bend, Wisconsin, May 15-21. Sponsored by the Wisconsin Writers Association, the Novel-In-Progress Bookcamp is for writers working on a novel or creative nonfiction book. Includes instructional classes, one-on-one consultations, group critique sessions, guest speakers and special activities all focused on your work-in-progress. Hosted at a retreat center and spa in Southeast Wisconsin. **Contact:** Dave Rank. Novel-In-Progress Bookcamp, Wisconsin Writers Association, 831 S. Seventh Ave., West Bend, WI 53095. 262-717-5154. pres@wiwrite.org novelbookcamp.com

WRITE-BY-THE-LAKE WRITER'S WORKSHOP AND RETREAT

Madison, Wisconsin, June 13-17. Choose fiction, writing for children, creative nonfiction or poetry and spend a week creating, exploring and polishing your work with other dedicated writers. Graduate credit is available for an additional fee. **Contact:** UW-Madison Continuing Studies, 21 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53715. 608-262-3447. Christine.DeSmet@dcs.wisc.edu continuingstudies.wisc.edu/conferences

WYOMING

JACKSON HOLE WRITERS CONFERENCE

Jackson, Wyoming, June 23-25. Share your work with other writers through critiques, workshops and open mic nights. Also utilize the opportunity to discuss your work one-on-one with experienced authors, editors and agents. Featured authors include Gretel Ehrlich, Lynne Sharon Schwartz and poets Paisley Rekdal and Maria Melendez Kelson.

Contact: Jackson Hole Writers Conference, P.O. Box 1974, 265 S Cache St., Jackson, WY 83001. 307-413-3332. connie@blackhen.com jacksonholewritersconference.com

LITERATURE & LANDSCAPE OF THE HORSE

Laramie, Wyoming, May 30-June 4. A unique adventure for anyone who yearns for nature, longs to reconnect with horses, and hungers for creative inspiration in an authentic western ranch setting. Combines riding, writing and reflection with guest facilitator Sheri Griffith. **Contact:** Paige Lambert, Mt. Vernon, Colorado. 303-842-7360. page@pagelambert.com pagelambert.com/horse_literature.html

INTERNATIONAL

SALT CAY WRITERS RETREAT

Salt Cay, Bahamas, May 23-28. Offers individualized instruction from bestselling authors, top editors and literary agents as well as a dolphin swim, free writing time and student and faculty author readings. Faculty includes Lorenzo Carcaterra, Lee Child, Ann Hood, Erin Harris and Téa Obreht. **Contact:** Salt Cay Writers Retreat. Christopher Graham, 732-267-6449. chrisg@bksp.org saltcaywritersretreat.com

SAN MIGUEL WRITERS' CONFERENCE

San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, Feb. 10-14. Held in historic San Miguel, a mecca for writers, artists and musicians. Includes sessions and panels as well as optional agent pitches, consultations and intensives. Also offers excursions. Fully bilingual. **Contact:** San Miguel Literary Sala, Box 526, 220 N. Zapata Hwy. #11, Laredo, TX 78043. Email from website. sanmiguelwritersconference.org

LEFT BANK WRITERS RETREAT

Paris, France, June 19-25. A group of less than eight writers gather in Paris's Left Bank for a week of workshops and tours. Genre include poetry, fiction, nonfiction, memoir, drama and any other project that can benefit from the writing techniques of Left Bank Writers like Stein, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. **Contact:** Left Bank Writers Retreat, P.O. Box 968, Jackson, WY 83001. 307-734-5335. darla@wordenpr.com leftbankwritersworkshop.com

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CONTESTS

CALL FOR ENTRIES: 2016 Colorado Prize for Poetry. \$2,000 honorarium and book publication. Submit book-length collection of poems by January 14, 2016. The \$25 entry fee includes one-year subscription to *Colorado Review*. Obtain complete guidelines by sending SASE or visiting website. Colorado Prize for Poetry, Center for Literary Publishing, 9105 Campus Delivery, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-9105. <http://coloradoprize.colostate.edu>.

CALL FOR ENTRIES: 2016 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction. Final judge is **Gish Jen**. \$2,000 awarded to author of winning story, plus publication in Fall 2016 issue of *Colorado Review*. Deadline is March 14, 2016. \$15 entry fee. Send SASE or visit website for complete guidelines. Nelligan Prize, *Colorado Review*, 9105 Campus Delivery, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-9105. <http://nelliganprize.colostate.edu>

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Julie Murphy

The success of Julie Murphy's debut novel *Side Effects May Vary* created great anticipation for her follow up *Dumplin'*.

The book quickly took the top spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list for YA. A former library youth programs coordinator, Murphy writes with a keen sense of teenage sensibilities and dialogue. She first experimented with screenwriting, but quickly realized YA is a natural fit for her. The self-taught writer has earned critical and popular acclaim for her unconventional characters, original storylines and prose that conveys authenticity. In *Side Effects May Vary*, she went against the grain and chose a nonlinear format and a somewhat unlikable main character. Both were wise choices that effectively drove the story. In *Dumplin'*, Murphy features the overweight protagonist Willowdean. Rather than taking the traditional plot route revolving around body insecurity and constant dieting, Murphy drew a self-confident character. Themes of friendship, love and family are the focus and are tackled with a skilled combination of humor and depth.

Nonlinear format

It was organic for me to piece the story together as I went. I was very much a novice when I wrote that first draft and the style worked for me and my thought patterns. I think the best thing writers can do is allow themselves to make mistakes. Play with different styles and formats. If you can let yourself be wrong, you'll definitely know when you're right.

Second book expectations

I did feel a lot of pressure leading up to the release, but I've quickly learned

that I can only control the writing. All I can do is write a better book and one that I'm proud of. I can't meet everyone's expectations, but I can strive to meet my own.

Unexpected protagonist

Growing up, I was always thirsty for heroines like Willowdean. As a fat girl and now a fat woman, I'm always excited to see heroines I can relate to, but I'm all too familiar with the disappointment of being misrepresented. When I decided to write a book about a fat character, I knew without a doubt that I didn't want the character arc to be tied to the protagonist "fixing" her body, but instead I wanted to create a character whose journey centered on loving the body she has.

Working from home

I do work from home, and time man-



agement is not my strongest suit, especially when I'm juggling the various marketing demands that come with publishing. Most people don't realize that very little of writing full time is actually writing.

I would love to eventually

find some kind of office space away from home to help me better divide my work life from my personal life, because right now that balance is something I'm struggling with.

Writing YA characters

The key to nailing the YA voice is remembering that teens aren't these aliens we so often make them out to be. They experience heartbreak and joy and loss and anxiety and everything else adults do. Sure, sometimes those emotions are heightened, because everything is turned up to 10 when you're feeling it for the first time. But teens are capable of being rational and deliberate. You've got to take all that into account when you're formulating voice.

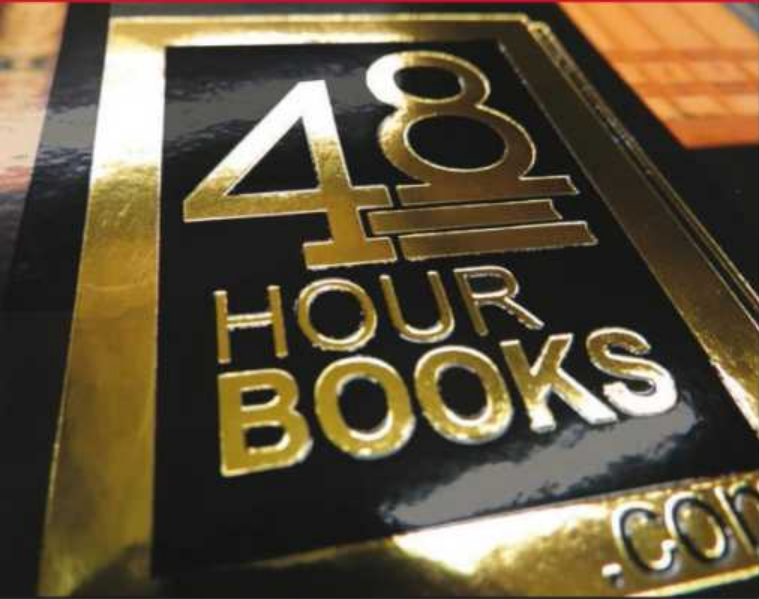
Starting approach

I really try to have setting and my main cast of characters fully realized before drafting. That's the biggest thing for me. I'm required to send synopses to my editor, but I often stray. I never know the exact ending, but I'm always aware of what kind of taste I want to leave in the reader's mouth, if that makes sense. 



Allison Futterman has been published in *Charlotte* magazine and writes frequently for *The Charlotte Observer*.

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Website: vcfa.edu/wcya

Hamline University

Degree: MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults
Program founded: 2007
Categories: Picture book, early reader, middle grade and young adult fiction, poetry, nonfiction, graphic novel, comics
Faculty: Gary D. Schmidt, Gene Luen Yang, Jane Resh Thomas, Marsha Wilson Chall
Website: hamline.edu/cia/mfac

Lesley University

Degree: MFA in Creative Writing
Campus location: Cambridge, Massachusetts
Alumni: *Blue Ribbon Dad* by Beth Raisner Glass was featured on "Reading Rainbow."
New Writing for Young People faculty: Michelle Knudsen (*Library Lion* and *Evil Librarian*) and Jason Reynolds (*The Boy in*

the Black Suit and *When I Was the Greatest*)
Website: lesley.edu/mfa

Simmons University

Degree: M.A. in Children's Literature, M.F.A. in Writing for Children, M.A. in Children's Literature/M.F.A. in Writing for Children, M.A. in Children's Literature/M.S. in Library Science
Location: Boston
Course sampling: Criticism of Literature for Children, Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Young Adults, History of Children's Book Publishing, Victorian Children's Literature, Nonsense and Subversive Rhymes, The Graphic Novel and *The Wizard of Oz*
Special feature: The Center for the Study of Children's Literature
Website: simmons.edu/academics/accelerated-and-dual-degree

Spalding University

Degree: MFA in Writing
Faculty: David-Matthew Barnes, Susan Campbell Bartoletti, Beth Bauman, Edie Hemingway, Lesléa Newman
Alumni awards: E. B. White Honor Book Award, Nautilus

Award, Parents' Choice Gold Award, Lambda Literary Award, LGBT Young Adult category, Bank Street College Best Book of the Year list
Bonus: Students can study a second area of concentration to expand their craft.
Website: spalding.edu/academics/mfa-in-writing/aoc

Hollins University

Degree: MA or MFA in writing of children's and young adult literature; M.F.A. in Children's Book Writing & Illustrating; Certificate in Children's Book Illustration
Program founded: 1992
2016 Writers in Residence: Cece Bell, author of the Newbery Honor Book graphic novel memoir *El Deafo*, and Tom Angleberger, author of the Origami Yoda books
Course sampling: Traditions and Adaptations in Literature for Young Children, The Fantastic in Children's Literature, Exploring the Boundaries — Books for and About Boys, The Modern Young Adult Novel, Mothers in Children's and Young-Adult Literature
Website: hollins.edu/academics/graduate-degrees

Notes from the blogosphere

A teenager's world

Fifteen-year old Jessica Bernt of Bookish Serendipity describes herself this way: "Reader. Lover of words. High school student. Writer. Blogger. Etsy owner. Entrepreneur. Food enthusiast. Dreamer. Capricorn. Book nerd. Pinterest lover." She offered the following insider tips for bloggers.



What three lessons can older bloggers learn from teen bloggers?

There are thousands of amazing bloggers out there, and many of them are teens. I've learned a lot from older bloggers, and I also think there are several things that older bloggers can learn from us teens.

What tips can you offer when it comes to interviewing authors?

I love hosting author interviews. They are always so much fun, and are very well-received. When I am drafting interview questions, I always try to write questions that highlight some of the author's accomplishments (prestigious awards and career highlights, for example) and questions that let the reader get to know the author on a more personal level. I always try to include a wacky question or two, because those are the questions that allow the author's style and personality to shine through. They tend to be the most memorable as well.

The media loves to tease teenagers for always being on social media, but it also means that we generally have an excellent grasp on how it works, and how to use it effectively.

Teenagers are usually great at making connections with others online and building authentic online identities, since the Internet has been around for all of our lives.

In a world that is constantly evolving, teenagers are generally excellent at adapting to changes. This is certainly helpful as a blogger since software is being frequently updated, social media is always changing, and it is challenging to stay on top of things.

Hi resolution

Keep your craft on track in the new year with these on-the-go tools for convenience and inspiration. No more excuses in 2016!

► PROJECTION KEYBOARD

Turn your writing into virtual insanity with this go-anywhere keyboard. This laser projection keyboard works on any flat surface for convenient typing on the go. Compatible with Apple and Android, this virtual keyboard uses Bluetooth technology and cutting-edge optics to read your fingers. The battery lasts up to two hours. \$120. brookstone.com



► 3,000 CLASSICS

If writer's block hits, fire up your computer to read one of 3,000 classic books. This charming flash drive holds an entire library of literary favorites, including Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Jane Austen and many more. Pick up some writing hints from your predecessors, and start your writing anew. \$29.95. innovations.com.au

► WRITER'S REMEDY

Shake loose a few inspirational words as a writing exercise or when the writing gets tough. This small jar contains more than 140 magnetic word tiles to help mix up your vocabulary or get an idea moving. \$14.90. writersstore.com



► YOGA FOR WRITERS

Maintain two resolutions at the same time with this funky poster of yoga poses for writers. The warrior pose transforms into the survival-story memoirist, while downward dog becomes the looking-for-an-agent pose. Get your workout on and find some inspiration while flexing your writing muscles.

\$7. electricliterature.com

YOGA for WRITERS

Writer's block giving you a hard time? Put down the pen and get up and moving. If you're stuck, your body will find a way to get you unstuck.

POSE for PROSE



► SMART LAP DESK

This ergonomic wooden lap desk means you can work from anywhere – including your favorite chair. The counterbalanced, weighted surface is the perfect size for a laptop, or slip your tablet into the stand-up slot for a completely clear workspace. The gripping square holds your smart phone still, and the cushioned wrist pads lend full support. \$49.95. barnesandnoble.com



Leisure



Leisure Money Work
Success Religion Home
Relationships Eating/drinking

► 750 WORDS

Join the community that makes a game out of writing 750 words a day. This free website provides a writing platform that is completely private, never publishing your words anywhere online. Earn points and reward badges for simply committing to your craft. \$5/month after a free trial. 750words.com

“All Things Are Connected”

By Orrin Hanratty

When I was ten-years old, I learned when two things meet they are forever changed.

The man who told me this had just knocked Mom up on a one-night stand. He was a nice guy. He was tall and skinny as hell, and bald shaven. On the right side of his head was a tattoo that looked like eagle wings.

I'd been up for hours eating cereal and watching cartoons with the sound off when he stumbled out of Mom's room. He was pulling his pants up with his shirt in one hand and his shoes in the other. He didn't know I was there until I laughed at him. He looked so ridiculous trying not to wake mom up I couldn't help it.

“Hi,” he whispered.

“You don't have to whisper,” I said. “After a night like that she's out. She wouldn't hear a bomb.”

The look on his face when I said that was priceless. He had been on the receiving ends of one of Mom's vocal nights. It woke me up when she got home, and this guy had probably had his head spinning from the screams. She got like that when she was drunk. The set of his shoulders sagged and a frown crept down his face, and I saw something I had never seen on one of Mom's “sleepover buddies.”

“You, uh, see this a lot?” he asked.

“Enough to know what's going on,” I said.

“I, uh, well you're probably too young to understand this, but your mom is a beautiful woman. And I was... well...I...”

“You don't have to tell me what you're doing or why you're here. I know how Mom is.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Mom's all about these crazy life sayings that she's put together. She's got a notebook full of them. She meets a lot of people at that bar she works at. Sometimes someone will say something that hits her just the right way, and she has a drink with them. That usually turns into a lot more than just one and then they end up where you're standing.”

“I see,” he said. He looked all awkward with his bald head and skinny chest heaving, not knowing what to do. He rubbed his hand across the wing tattoo on the side of his head and started.

“Crap, I had hoped that part of the night wasn't true. Why did I shave my head?” he said.

“I don't know. Maybe you shaved it to get that tattoo. It looks like a drunk tattoo.”

“Tattoo? Where?”

I pointed to the side of my head.

“Oh that,” he said. “It's a birthmark.” I offered him some cereal and he shrugged. We sat and watched cartoons on the couch for a while. Road Runner. I don't know why but after a couple of quiet cartoons you feel the need to bond. So I asked him what he said to my mom.

He shrugged. “How would I know what I said?”

“Oh honey, I could just eat. You. Up.” I said, mimicking my mother's voice. His giant green eyes looked like Wile E. Coyote's running off the cliff. He remembered.

“I said that it is an incontrovertible law of physics that when two bodies meet they are altered forever.”

“Huh?”

“Look at it this way,” he picked up the spoon from the bowl and bent it in his hands. “My hand met this object and it's now changed. Forever. You can bend it back to what looks like the shape, but you aren't going to be able to make it exactly the same. Maybe it'll look like it's exactly the same way, but the molecules within it had to be rearranged and it will never be exactly what it was before. The same goes for everything you've ever touched your whole life no matter how softly. It can happen if you even breathe on something. It can happen if you just look at something. It is happening all the time.”

I took the spoon back and pulled the bend out. I looked at the handle curve, and thought that it still didn't look right. I fiddled with it for a few more minutes before I gave up. I looked up and he was gone. I dug another bite of cereal from the bowl.

Three weeks later, my mother vomited and wondered how she'd even got pregnant. She didn't even know his name. She swore that she was done with that. And she stuck to it. Nine months after, that I became a big brother. Sara had bright green eyes and a birthmark like eagle wings on the side of her head. I knew from then on that when two things met they changed each other.

When I was fourteen, and Sara was four, I got into trouble. It was Christmas. There weren't any toys under the tree. I never knew that there was supposed to be until about a week and a half before. I guess I saw it on TV, but that

**I didn't take them
all, I didn't want
them all, I just
wanted enough
so that my sister
would have some-
thing to open.**



Shutterstock

wasn't real life, you know? I thought it was just a TV thing. I was wrong.

I went over to a new friend's house. I had thought he'd lived on the first floor of the thing, but his family had the whole thing. I had no concept of multiple floors. It was like a strange new world to me. Their tree was one of those real ones. It was green and a million feet high smelling like a weird type of Pinesol that didn't make you gag. I had never smelled a pine tree before. I felt four inches tall and my friend never even noticed.

I just remember on the walk home seeing a lot of little things about Christmas time I hadn't really noticed before. People carrying bags of stuff out of shops. Tree sales. Every Santa Claus on every corner was ho-ho-ho-ing away like the world was great and not a giant crap bag. I'd never seen Mom with any bags like those, and that didn't bother me. But I had a little sister now. She was smart. Scary smart.

Those giant green eyes could read your mind. She'd start to notice the things we didn't get from Mom.

So that night I broke into my friend's house, I'd remembered the code his mother punched into their security system, and took a five or six presents that were under there. I didn't take them all, I didn't want them all, I just wanted enough so that my sister would have something to open.

That was how my sister ended up with a tie, a blender, two books by some guy named Gribelski and a Wacky Wally doll and I ended up in juvey. In juvey I met Steck. And Steck taught me about weed. Six months after I stole my sister a Christmas, I got out and started dealing my sister a bicycle.

Mom didn't ask about the money or why I did what I did. She and I had a silent agreement that Sara came first, and she got to have a happy childhood. Mine was well and truly gone, and mom... mom had no idea how to do happy.



So I made sure that Sara got what she needed and was a good girl; I looked out for her. It was the only thing I could give her.

When high school ended for me, Steck was out and we got our own place. It was low-key but it had a couple floors. We did jobs, and earned. He was a mess, couldn't keep out of his own product, but he knew what was what and who was who. I followed orders and stayed straight. We made a great team, and I was the difference between him and a lot more jail time. He was the difference between me and living the way Mom brought me up.

Mom moved to a better town and changed jobs. She didn't want me rubbing off on her little girl. It was the first time she'd ever done something right.

Objects meeting and changing. I thought about Sara's dad from time to time. His birthmark and his eyes. If only I had never smelled those stupid pines.

When my sister was seventeen, she wanted me to meet her boyfriend. She said I was the only one she wanted to meet him, because mom was a psycho about boyfriends. She told me mom didn't understand love and happiness. She never did anything spur of the moment.

I didn't even laugh at her when she said it.

She brought the boyfriend over to my place, and I was shocked. He was at least twenty years older than she was, wearing a scarf and had this long salt and pepper hair, all pulled back into a ponytail. He looked all right. He was a cool guy. We sat around my table and talked all night. He knew what I was, what I did for a living and he was okay with it.

He was a professor at a local college. He'd led one of the science camp things Sara did in the summer, and they just hooked into each other. They got each other's jokes; they knew the same movies, books, everything. He was helping get my sister's stuff together for college applications, and was going to help her get somewhere in the world. And he clearly loved my sister. My sister loved him. That was enough for me.

We had a really great night.

"Hey, I'm going to stay at Lawrence's house tonight. Cover for me with Mom?"

"Of course," I said.

He held out his hand and said, "It is an incontrovertible law of physics that when two bodies meet, they are altered forever."

I breathed.

He had bright, green eyes.

I shook his hand.

I felt so cold.

It couldn't be.

I had to know.

I followed him home. Them home. She went into the house with him. I sat and I watched that fucking door all night. She came out in the morning and he came with her, they stood at the door and kissed, he slapped her butt as she walked away. She would take the bus home. I called Mom and told her I just put Sara on the bus. I always keep my promises to my sister.

He answered the door after the first knock.

"Hey, how did you know where I –" I put the butt of my gun into his nose and followed him in as he fell. I made sure he was unconscious.

I shaved his head and put glasses on him. Then I tilted his head to the side.

Eagle wings.

He wasn't a bad guy. He had no way of knowing. God knows mom never told him she was pregnant. It's not his fault.

But that doesn't matter.

What matters is Sara, who grew up with a love-crazy mother and a monster brother in the hovels and holes of this country. She grew up clean. She grew up brilliant. She grew up hopeful. She *is* my hope.

One day my sister will know everything in the world. Everything but this. Never, ever this. It's best for everyone if I'm the only one who knows this.

A gunshot.

An echo.

A splatter.

His birthmark was all gone now. His eyes stayed closed.

On his bed next to his body are his clothes laid out for him. I saw the tie I stole for her sitting next to his shirt. The tie said he was the best dad ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Orrin Hanratty lives in Providence, Rhode Island, where he works as a machinist. He recently received his MFA from Hamline University's Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults program. This is clearly not a children's story. "'All Things are Connected' started out just as the narrator's voice," says Hanratty. "I knew he was going to be violent and monstrous, but I wanted that to come from a place of love. The very worst things we can do are always because of love."



KEEPING UP WITH THE KIDS

It may be hard to keep up with the kids in social media. But children's and YA authors still take to the Twitterverse to trade MTs about their stories, craft and characters.



Mark Marino author @MCMarino_Kids
I'm realizing that most plots want not for more events, but more & deeper emotion tied to the events #kidlit #childrensbooks



Ash McKenna @ashiimckenna
The heartbreak of Matilda going back to Miss Honey's house and finding it bare #childrensbooks #books #amreading #roalddahl @roald_dahl



Terre Melisi @TerreMelisi
My three C's to be when writing. Clear, concise, creative. #writing #amwriting #novels #childrensbooks



Beth Ellyn @BethEllynSummer
spent an inordinate amount of time deciding whether the love interest smells like aftershave, chlorine, or a baked good #amwriting #YAwriter



Mary Jane Capps @maryjanecapps
Let it go. #authorsofinstagram #walk-throughfear #trusttheprocess #yaaauthor



Gin Price @Gin_Price
How do I motivate myself to #write? I can't play League of Legends #LoLesport until I finish my daily word count. #amwriting #YAauthor



Meredith Madyda @mjmadysda
"Writing a kids' book is easy!" #TenThingsNotToSayToAWriter -- a #ChildrensWriter



Mark Walma @markwwnb
#Galleyproof review all but done. So many #corrections to make. Then there's the new #middlegrade #novel I've just started #writing! Busy!

**DEADLINE FOR
SUBMISSION.**
December 6th

Have **YOUR** story
read by novelist
Colum McCann!

TWO ROADS DIVERGE

Write a 2,000-word short story responding to one or both quotes by novelist and short story writer Colum McCann (and perhaps keep in mind Robert Frost's poem "A Road Not Taken"). What elements of duality and divergence can you include: duplicitous acts, binary oppositions, communication with the "other side," double indemnity, twins? Let your imagination riff on taking a plot, character, setting or theme in two directions.

Novelist and short story writer Colum McCann will read the finalists and choose the winners.

writermag.com/contests

"There is always
room for at least
two truths."

—TransAtlantic

"With all respects
to heaven,
I like it here."

—Let the Great World Spin



